

Where Is God in Suffering and Hard Times?

**From the "Major Works"
series**

CJS Hayward

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Preface

"Where is God when it hurts?"

"Is God really good?"

"Did it have to hurt *that* much?"

Questions like these flow like a volley of arrows when it hurts. And when people are emerging from the most difficult part, they don't really have answers. But they do have a sense of "God is in charge," and "I don't know how, but God is using this for good."

Suffering exists, and it is unavoidable. But there are positive uses for suffering in our spiritual life, and it waters the soil for spiritual growth.

The works enclosed in this volume, in their different ways, all deal with suffering. They are offered in the prayer that they may be a source of strength and growth for you in the sufferings you face.

The Angelic Letters

My dearly beloved son Eukairos;

I am writing to you concerning the inestimable responsibility and priceless charge who has been entrusted to you. You have been appointed guardian angel to one Mark.

Who is Mark, whose patron is St. Mark of Ephesus? A man. What then is man? Microcosm and mediator, the midpoint of Creation, and the fulcrum for its sanctification. Created in the image of God; created to be prophet, priest, and king. It is toxic for man to know too much of his beauty at once, but it is also toxic for man to know too much of his sin at once. For he is mired in sin and passion, and in prayer and deed offer what help you can for the snares all about him. Keep a watchful eye out for his physical situation, urge great persistence in the liturgical and the sacramental life of the Church that he gives such godly participation, and watch for his ascesis with every eye you have. Rightly, when we understand what injures a man, nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself: but it is treacherously easy for a man to injure himself. Do watch over him and offer what help you can.

With Eternal Light and Love,
YOUR FELLOW-SERVANT AND ANGEL

My dear son Eukairos;

I would see it fitting to offer a word about medicating experience and medicating existence.

When one of the race of men medicates experience by means of wine, that is called drunkenness. When by means of the pleasures of the palate, that is called gluttony. When by means of other pleasures, it is called lust. When by means of possessions and getting things, it is called avarice. Escapism is an ancient vice and a root of all manner of evils: ancient Christians were warned strongly against attempting to escape this world by medicating experience.

Not that pleasure is the only way; medicating experience by mental gymnastics is called metaphysics in the occult sense, and medicating experience by means of technology is a serious danger.

Not all technologies, and perhaps not any technology, is automatically a problem to use. But when technologies become a drone they are a problem. Turning on a radio for traffic and weather news, and then turning it off, is not a drone. Listening to the radio at a particular time to devote your attention to a concert is not a drone. Turning on a radio in the background while you work is a drone; even *Zen and the Art of the Motorcycle Maintenance* discusses what is wrong with mechanics having the radio on in the background. And texting to get specific information or coordinate with someone is not a drone, but a stream of text messages that is always on is a drone. Technology has its uses, but when technology is a drone, noise in the background that prevents silence from getting too uncomfortable, then it is a spiritual problem, a tool to medicate experience. And there are some technologies, like

video games, that *exist* to medicate experience.

(Of course, technologies are not the only drone; when Mark buckles down to prayer he discovers that his mind is a drone with a stream of thoughts that are a life's work to quiet.)

More could be said about technologies, but my point here is to point out one of the dangers Mark faces. Not the only one, by any means, but he has at his disposal some very powerful tools for doing things that are detrimental. It's not just a steady stream of X-rated spam that puts temptation at his fingertips. He has all the old ways to medicate experience, and quite a few powerful technologies that can help him medicate his experience as well. And for that he needs prayer.

But what is to be done? The *ways* of medicating experience may be in some measure than many saints have contended with; the *answer* is the same. Don't find another way to medicate experience, or escape the conditions God has placed you in, trying to escape to Paradise. Don't ask for an easier load, but tougher muscles. Instead of escaping the silence, engage it. *Prayerfully* engage it. If your dear Mark does this, after repenting and despairing of finding a way to escape and create Paradise, he will find that escape is not needed, and Paradise, like the absent-minded Professor's lost spectacles, were not in any of the strange places he looked but on his nose the whole time.

A man does not usually wean himself of drones in one fell swoop, but pray and draw your precious charge to cut back, to let go of another way of medicating experience even if it is very small, and to seek not a lighter load but a stronger back. If he weans himself of noise that medicates uncomfortable silence, he might find that silence is not what he fears.

Watch after Mark, and hold him in prayer.

Your Dearly Loving Elder,

Your Fellow-Servant,

BUT A WIND AND A FLAME OF FIRE

My dear, dear Eukairos;

When fingers that are numb from icy cold come into a warm, warm house, it stings.

You say that the precious treasure entrusted to you prayed, in an uncomfortable silence, not for a lighter load but for a stronger back, and that he was fearful and almost despairing in his prayer. And you wonder why he looks down on himself for that. Do not deprive him of his treasure by showing him how much good he is done.

He has awakened a little, and I would have you do all in your power to show him the silence of Heaven, however little he can receive it yet. You know some theologians speak of a river of fire, where in one image among others, the Light of Heaven and the fire of Hell are the same thing: not because good and evil are one, but because God can only give himself, the uncreated Light, in love to his creatures, and those in Hell are twisted through the rejection of Christ so that the Light of Heaven is to them the fire of Hell. The silence of Heaven is something like this; silence is of Heaven and there is nothing to replace it, but to those not yet able to bear joy, the silence is an uncomfortable silence. It is a bit like the Light of Heaven as it is experienced by those who reject it.

Help Mark in any way you can to taste the silence of Heaven as joy. Help him to hear the silence that is echoed in the Church's chanting: when he seeks a stronger back to bear silence, strengthen his back, and help him to taste the silence not as bitter but sweet. Where noise and drones would anaesthetize his pain, pull him *through* his pain to health, wholeness, and joy.

The Physician is at work!

With Eternal Light and Love,
YOUR FELLOW-SERVANT AND ANGEL

Dear blessed Eukairos;

Your charge has had a fall. Do your best that this not be the last word: help him get up. Right now he believes the things of God are not for those like him.

The details of the fall I will not treat here, but suffice it to say that when someone begins to wake up, the devils are furious. They are often given permission to test the awakening man, and often he falls. And you know how the devils are: before a fall, they say that God is easy-going and forgiving, and after a fall, that God is inexorable. Do your best to aid a person being seduced with the lie that God is inexorable.

Mark believes himself unfit for the service of the Kingdom. Very well, and in fact he *is*, but it is the special delight of the King to work in and through men who have made themselves unfit for his service. Don't brush away a mite of his humility as one fallen, but show him what he cannot believe, that God wishes to work through him now as much as *ever* And that God wishes for him prayer, liturgy, sacrament..

And open his eyes now, a hint here, a moment of joy there: open them that eternity is now: eternal life is not something that begins after he dies, but that takes root now, and takes root even (or rather, *especially*) in those who repent. He considers himself unworthy of both Heaven and earth, and he *is*; therefore, in God's grace, give him both Heaven and earth. Open up earth as an icon, a window to Heaven, and draw him to share in the uncreated Light and Life.

Open up his repentance; it is a window to Heaven.

In Light and Life and Love,
YOUR BROTHER ANGEL

My dear fellow-ministering angel;

I would make a few remarks on those windows of Heaven called icons.

To Mark, depending on the sense of the word 'window', a 'window' is an opening in a wall with a glass divider, or alternately the 'window' is the glass divider separating inside from outside. But this is not the exact understanding when Orthodox say an icon is a window of Heaven; it is more like what he would understand by an open window, where wind blows, and inside and outside meet. (In most of human history, a window fitted with glass was the exception, not the rule.) If an icon is a window of Heaven, it is an opening to Heaven, or an opening between Heaven and earth.

Now Mark does not understand this, and while you may draw him to begin to sense this, that is not the point. In *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a man speaks who was given the sacred Gospels in an old, hard-to-understand book, and was told by the priest, "Never mind if you do not understand what you are reading. The devils will understand it." Perhaps, to Mark, icons are still somewhat odd pictures with strange postures and proportions. You may, if you want, help him see that there is perspective in the icons, but instead of the usual perspective of people in their own world, it is reverse perspective whose vanishing point lies behind him because Mark is in the picture. But instead of focusing on correcting his understanding, and certainly correcting his understanding all at once, draw him to venerate and look at

these openings of Heaven. Never mind if he does not fully grasp the icons he venerates. *The devils will understand.*

And that is true of a great many things in life; draw Mark to participate in faith and obedience. He expects to understand first and participate second, but he needs to come to a point of participating first and understanding second. Many things need to start on the outside and work inwards.

Serving Christ,
Whose Incarnation Unfurls in Holy Icons,
YOUR FELLOW

Dear cherished, luminous son;

Your charge is reading a good many books. Most of them are good, but I urge you to spur him to higher things.

It is a seemingly natural expression of love to try to know as much about possible about Orthodoxy. But mature Orthodox usually spend less time trying to understand Orthodoxy through books. And this is *not* because they have learned everything there is to learn. (That would be impossible.) Rather, it is because they've found a deeper place to dig.

God does not want Mark to be educated and have an educated mind. He wants him to have an enlightened mind. The Orthodox man is not supposed to have good thoughts in prayer, but to have no thoughts. The Orthodox settled on the path have a clear mind that is enlightened in hesychastic silence. And it is better to sit in the silence of Heaven than read the Gospel as something to analyze.

Books have a place. Homilies have a place. But they are one shadow of the silence of Heaven. And there are more important things in the faith, such as fasting and

almsgiving, repentance and confession, and prayer, the crowning jewel of all asceticism. Give Mark all of these gems.

With Deep Affection,
YOUR BROTHER ANGEL

My dearly beloved, cherished fellow angel Eukairos;

Your charge Mark has been robbed.

Your priceless charge Mark has been robbed, and I am concerned.

He is also concerned about a great many things: his fear now, which is understandable, and his concerns about where money may come from, and his loss of an expensive smartphone and a beautiful pocketwatch with sentimental as well as financial value to him, and his inconvenience while waiting on new credit cards.

There are more concerns where those came from, but I am concerned because he is concerned about the wrong things. He has well over a week's food in his fridge and he believes that God failed to provide. Mark does not understand that *everything that happens to a man is either a temptation God allowed for his strengthening, or a blessing from God*. I am concerned that after God has allowed this, among other reasons so Mark can get his priorities straight, he is doing everything but seeking in this an opportunity for spiritual growth to greater maturity.

If you were a human employee, this would be the time for you to be punching in *lots* of overtime. Never mind that he thinks unconsciously that you and God have both deserted him; your strengthening hand has been invisible to him. I do not condemn you for any of this, but this time has been appointed for him to have opportunities for growth and for you to be working with him, and the fact that he

does not seek growth in this trial is only reason for you to work all the harder. That he is seeking to get things back the way they were, and suffering anger and fear, is only reason for you to exercise more diligent care. God is working with him now as much as ever, and I would advise you for now to work to the point of him seeking his spiritual good in this situation, however short he falls of right use of adversity for now.

Your name, "Eukairos," comes from "eu", meaning "good", and "kairos", an almost inexhaustible word which means, among other things, "appointed time" and "decisive moment." You and Mark are alike called to dance the great dance, and though Mark may not see it now, you are God's agent and son supporting him in a great and ordered dance where everything is arranged in God's providence. Right now Mark sees none of this, but as his guardian angel you are charged to work with him in the dance, a dance where God incorporates his being robbed and will incorporate his spiritual struggles and, yes, provide when Mark fails to see that the righteous will never be forsaken.

A good goal would be for Mark to pray for those that robbed him, and through those prayers honestly desire their good, or come to that point. But a more immediate goal is his understanding of the struggle he faces. Right now he sees his struggle in terms of money, inconveniences, and the like. Raise his eyes higher so he can see that it is a spiritual struggle, that God's providence is not overruled by this tribulation, and that if he seeks first the Kingdom of God, God himself knows Mark's material needs and will show deepest care for him.

Your Fellow-Servant in Prayer,

**BUT AN ANGEL WHO CANNOT STRUGGLE MARK'S
STRUGGLE ON HIS BEHALF**

My dear, esteemed son and fellow-angel Eukairos;

That was a deft move on your part, and I thank you for what you have helped foster in Mark's thoughts.

Mark began to console himself with the deep pit of porn, that poison that is so easily found in his time and place. And he began to pray, on his priest's advice, "Holy Father John, pray to God for me," and "Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for me," Saint John the Much-Suffering and Saint Mary of Egypt being saints to remember when fighting that poison. And you helped him for a moment to see how he was turned in on himself and away from others, and he prayed for help caring about others.

At 10:30 PM that night on the dot, one of his friends was walking in the dark, in torrential rains, and fell in the street, and a car ran over his legs. This friend was someone with tremendous love for others, the kind of person you cannot help but appreciate, and now that he had two broken legs, the flow of love reversed. And Mark unwittingly found himself in an excellent situation to care about something other than himself. He quite forgot about his money worries; and he barely noticed a windfall from an unexpected source. He kept company and ran errands for his friend.

What was once only a smouldering ember is now a fire burning brightly. Work as you can to billow it into a blaze.

With an Eternal Love,
YOUR RESPECTFUL BROTHER ANGEL

My dear, scintillating son Eukairos;

I would recall to you the chief end of mankind. "To

glorify God and enjoy him forever" is not a bad answer; the chief end of mankind is to contemplate God. No matter what you do, Mark will never reach the strictest sense of contemplation such as monastic saints enjoy in their prayer, but that is neither here nor there. He can have a life ordered to contemplation even if he will never reach the spiritual quiet from which strict contemplation is rightly approached. He may never reach beyond the struggle of asceticism, but his purpose, on earth as well as in Heaven, is to contemplate God, and to be deified. The point of human life is to become by grace what Christ is by nature.

Mark is right in one way and wrong in another to realize that he has only seen the beginning of deification. He *has* started, and only started, the chief end of human life, and he is right to pray, go to confession, and see himself as a beginner. But what he is *wrong* about is imagining that the proof of his fledgling status is that his wishes are not fulfilled in the circumstances of his life: his unconscious and unstated assumption is that if he had real faith like saints who worked miracles, his wishes would be fulfilled and his life would be easier. Those saints had *less* wishes fulfilled, not more, and much harder lives than him.

(And this is beside the point that Mark is not called to perform miracles; he is called to something greater, the most excellent way: **love**.)

Mark imagines you, as his guardian angel, to be sent by God to see that at least some of his wishes happen, but the truth is closer to saying that you are sent by God to see that some of his wishes *do not* happen so that in the cutting off of self-will he may grow in ways that would be impossible if he always had his wishes. There is a French saying, «*On trouve souvent sa destinée par les chemins que l'on prend pour l'éviter.*»: "One often finds his destiny on the paths one takes to avoid it." Destiny is not an especially Christian idea, but there is a grain of truth here: *Men often find God's providence in the situations they hoped his providence would keep them out of.*

This cutting off of self-will is part of the self-transcendence that makes deification; it is foundational to monks and the office of spiritual father, but it is not a "monks-only" treasure. Not by half. God answers "No" to prayers to say "Yes" to something greater. But the "Yes" only comes *through* the "No."

As Mark has heard, "We pray because we want God to change our circumstances. God wants to use our circumstances to change us."

Mark has had losses, and he will have more to come, but what he does not understand is that the path of God's sanctification is precisely through the loss of what Mark thinks he needs. God is at work allowing Mark to be robbed. God is at work allowing Mark to use "his" "free" time to serve his friend. And God is at work in the latest challenge you wrote to me about.

Mark has lost his car. A drunk and uninsured driver slammed into it when it was parked; the driver was saved by his airbag, but Mark's car was destroyed, and Mark has no resources to get another car, not even a beater for now. And Mark imagines this as something that pushes him outside of the Lord's providence, not understanding that it is by God's good will that he is now being transported by friendship and generosity, that he is less independent now.

Right now Mark is not ready either to thank God for his circumstances or to forgive the driver. But do open his eyes to the good of friendship and generosity that now transports him. Even if he sees the loss of his car as an example of God failing to provide for him, help him to see the good of his being transported by the love and generosity of his friends. Help him to see God's providence in circumstances he would not choose.

Your Fellow-Servant in the Service of Man,

A BROTHER ANGEL

My dear son Eukairos;

Your precious charge, in perfectly good faith, believes strongly in bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. His devotion in trying to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is really quite impressive, but he is fundamentally confused about what that means, and he is not the only one.

Mark would never say that you can reason your way into Heaven, but he is trying to straighten out his worldview, and he thinks that straightening out one's ideas is what this verse is talking about. And he holds an assumption that if you're reasoning things out, or trying to reason things out, you're probably on the right path.

Trying to reason things out does not really help as much as one might think. Arius, the father of all heretics, was one of many to try to reason things out; people who devise heresies often try harder to reason things out than the Orthodox. And Mark has inherited a greatly overstated emphasis on how important or helpful logical reasoning is.

Mark would be surprised to hear this; his natural question might be, "If bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ is not what you do when you straighten out your worldview, then what on earth is?"

A little bit more of the text discusses unseen warfare and inner purity: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Men's thoughts are not just abstract reasoning; they are all sorts of things, some entangled with sinful desire, that

are around all the time to a mind that has not learned hesychastic silence. Thoughts that need to be taken captive include thoughts of money entangled with greed, thoughts of imagined success entangled with pride, thoughts of wrongs suffered entangled with anger, thoughts of food compounded with gluttony, thoughts of desired persons compounded with lust, thoughts of imagined future difficulties entangled with worry and doubt about the Lord's good providence. Such thoughts as these need to be addressed, and not by tinkering with one's worldview: these thoughts remain a battleground in spiritual warfare even if one's worldview condemns greed, pride, anger, gluttony, lust, worry, and doubt.

Work with Mark. Guide him and strengthen him in the unseen warfare that includes learning to cut off such thoughts as soon as possible: a fire that is spreading through a house is hard to put out, and what Mark needs to learn is to notice the smoke that goes before fire and extinguish the smouldering that is beginning and not waiting for leaping flames to make doomed efforts to fight it. Help him to see that his thoughts are not only abstract ideas, and help him to be watchful, aware of his inner state. Unseen warfare in thoughts is of inestimable importance, and do what you can to help him see a smouldering smoke when it has not become a raging fire, and to be watchful.

Do what you can to draw him to repeat the Jesus Prayer, to let it grow to a rhythm in him. If the question is, "What should I start thinking when I catch myself?", the answer is, "The Jesus prayer."

Keep working with Mark, and offer what support you can. And keep him in your prayers.

With Deepest Affection,

ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE ANGEL CHOIRS

Dear fellow-warrior, defender, and son Eukairos;

I wish to write to you concerning devils.

Mark has the wrong picture with a scientific worldview in which temptations are more or less random events that occur as a side effect of how the world works. Temptations are intelligently coordinated attacks by devils. They are part of unseen warfare such as Mark faces, part of an evil attack, but none the less on a leash. No man could be saved if the devils could give trials and temptations as much as they wished, but the devils are allowed to bring trials and temptations as much as God allows for the strengthening, and the discipleship, of his servants.

Some street drugs are gateway drugs, and some temptations are temptations to gateway sins. Gluttony, greed, and vanity are among the "gateway sins", although it is the nature of a sin to give way to other sins as well. Gluttony, for instance, opens the door to lust, and it is harder by far to fight lust for a man whose belly is stuffed overfull. (A man who would fare better fighting against lust would do well to eat less and fast more.) In sin, and also in virtue, he who is faithful in little is faithful in much, and he who is unfaithful in little is also unfaithful in much. You do not need to give Mark what he expects now, help in some great, heroic act of virtue. He needs your help in little, humble, everyday virtues, obedience when obedience doesn't seem worth the bother.

The liturgy speaks of "the feeble audacity of the demons", and Mark needs to know that that is true, and true specifically in his case. What trials God allows are up to God, and the demons are an instrument in the hand of a God who would use even the devils' rebellion to strengthen his sons. The only way Mark can fall into the demons' hands is by yielding to temptation: nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself. The trials Mark faces are intended for his glory, and more basically for God's glory in

him—but God chooses glory for himself that glorifies his saints. Doubtless this will conflict with Mark's plans and perceptions of what he needs, but God knows better, and *loves* Mark better than to give Mark everything he thinks he needs.

Do your best to strengthen Mark, especially as regards forgiveness to those who have wronged him and in the whole science of unseen warfare. Where he cannot see himself that events are led by an invisible hand, help him to at least have faith, a faith that may someday be able to discern.

And do help him to see that he is in the hands of God, that the words in the Sermon on the Mount about providence are not for the inhabitants of another, perfect world, but intended for him personally as well as others. He has rough things he will have to deal with; help him to trust that he receives providence at the hands of a merciful God who is ever working all things to good for his children.

With Love as Your Fellow-Warrior and Mark's,
YOUR FELLOW-WARRIOR IN THE WAR UNSEEN

My dear, watchful son Eukairos;

Mark has lost his job, and though he has food before him and a roof over his head, he thinks God's providence has run short.

Yet in all of this, he is showing a sign of growth: even though he does not believe God has provided, there is a deep peace, interrupted at times by worry, and his practice of the virtues allows such peace to enter even though he assumes that God can only provide through paychecks.

Work on him in this peace. Work on him in the joy of friendship. Even if he does not realize that he has food for

today and clothing for today, and that this is the providence he is set to ask for, help him to enjoy what he has, and give thanks to God for everything he has been given.

And hold him in your prayers.

As One Who Possesses Nothing,

ONE WHO RECEIVES ALL HE NEEDS FROM GOD

My prayerful, prayerful Eukairos;

Prayer is what Mark needs now more than ever.

Prayer is the silent life of angels, and it is a feast men are bidden to join. At the beginning it is words; in the middle it is desire; at the end it is silence and love. For men it is the outflow of sacrament, and its full depths are in the sacraments. There are said to be seven sacraments, but what men of Mark's day do not grasp is that seven is the number of perfection, and it would do as well to say that there are ten thousand sacraments, all bearing God's grace.

Help Mark to pray. Pray to forgive others, pray for the well-being of others, pray by being in silence before God. Help him to pray when he is attacked by passion; help him to pray when he is tempted and when he confesses in his heart that he has sinned: *O Lord, forgive me for doing this and help me to do better next time, for the glory of thy holy name and for the salvation of my soul.*

Work with Mark so that his life is a prayer, not only with the act-prayer of receiving a sacrament, but so that looking at his neighbor with chaste eyes he may pray out of the Lord's love. Work with Mark so that ordinary activity and work are not an interruption to a life of prayer, but simply a part of it. And where there is noise, help him to be straightened out in silence through his prayer.

And if this is a journey of a thousand miles that Mark

will never reach on earth, bid him to take a step, and then a step more. For a man to take one step into this journey is still something: the Thief crucified with Christ could only take one step, and he took that one step, and now stands before God in Paradise.

Ever draw Mark into deeper prayer.

With You Before God's Heart that Hears Prayers,
▲ PRAYING ANGEL

My dearly beloved, cherished, esteemed son; My holy angel who sees the face of Christ God; My dear chorister who sings before the eternal throne of God; My angel divine; My fellow-minister;

Your charge has passed through his apprenticeship successfully.

He went to church, and several gunmen entered. One of them pointed a gun at a visitor, and Mark stepped in front of her. He was ordered to move, and he stood firm. He wasn't thinking of being heroic; he wasn't even thinking of showing due respect to a woman. He only thought vaguely of appropriate treatment of a visitor and fear never deterred him from this vague sense of appropriate care for a visitor.

And so death claimed him to its defeat. O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? Death claimed saintly Mark to its defeat.

Mark is no longer your charge.

It is my solemn, profound, and grave pleasure to now introduce you to Mark, no longer as the charge under your care, but as a fellow-chorister with angels who will eternally stand with you before the throne of God in Heaven.

Go in peace.

Your Fellow-Minister,

מִיכָאֵל • MIXAHA • MICHAEL • WHO IS LIKE GOD?

The Arena

1. We stand in an arena, the great coliseum. For it is the apostles who were sent forth last, as if men condemned to die, made a spectacle unto the world, to angels and men.
2. St. Job was made like unto a champion waging war against Satan, on God's behalf. He lost everything and remained God-fearing, standing as the saint who vindicated God.
3. But all the saints vindicate God.
4. We are told as we read the trials in the Book of Job that Satan stands slandering God's saints day and night and said God had no saint worthy of temptation. And the Lord God Almighty allowed Satan to tempt St. Job.
5. We are told this, but in the end of the Scripture, even when St. Job's losses are repaid double, St. Job never hears. He never knows that he stands in the cosmic coliseum, as a champion on God's behalf. Never on earth does St. Job know the reason for the catastrophes that befell him.

6. St. Job, buffeted and bewildered, could see no rhyme or reason in what befell him. Yet even the plagues of Satan were woven into the plans of the Lord God who never once stopped working all things to good for this saint, and to the saint who remained faithful, the plagues of Satan are woven into the diadem of royal priesthood crowning God's saints.
7. Everything that comes to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation which God has allowed for our strengthening. The plagues by which Satan visited St. Job are the very means themselves by which God glorified his faithful saint.
8. Do not look for God in some other set of circumstances. Look for him in the very circumstances you are in. If you look at some of your circumstances and say, "God could not have allowed that!", you are not rightly accepting the Lord's work in the circumstances he has chosen to work his glory.
9. You are in the arena; God has given you weapons and armor by which to fight. A poor warrior indeed blames the weapons God has armed him with.
10. Fight therefore, before angels and men. The circumstances of your life are not inadequate, whether through God lacking authority, or wisdom, or love. The very sword blows of Satan glancing off shield and armor are ordained in God's good providence to burnish tarnishment and banish rust.
11. The Almighty laughs Satan to scorn. St. Job, faithful when he was stricken, unmasked the feeble audacity of the demons.

12. God gives ordinary providence for easy times, and extraordinary providence for hard times.
13. If times turn hard for men, and much harder for God's servants, know that this is ordained by God. Do not suppose God's providence came when you were young but not now.
14. What in your life do you wish were gone so you could be where you should be? When you look for God to train you in those very circumstances, that is the beginning of victory. That is already a victory won.
15. Look in every circumstance for the Lord to train you. The dressing of wounds after struggle is part of training, and so is live combat.
16. The feeble audacity of the demons gives every appearance of power, but the appearance deceives.
17. Nothing but your sins can wound you so that you are down. And even our sins are taken into the work of the Almighty if we repent.
18. When some trial comes to you, and you thank God, that is itself a victory.
19. Look for God's work here and now. If you will not let God work with you here and now, God will not fulfill all of your daydreams and then begin working with you; he will ask you to let him train you in the here and now.
20. Do you find yourself in a painfully rough situation? Then what can you do to lighten others' burdens? Instead of asking, "Why me?", ask, "Why not me?"

21. An abbot asked a suffering monk if he wanted the abbot to pray that his suffering be taken away. The disciple said, "No," and his master said, "You will outstrip me."
22. It is not a contradiction to say that both God has designs for us, and we are under the pressure of trials. Diamonds are only made through pressure.
23. No disciple is greater than his master. Should we expect to be above sufferings when the Son of God was made perfect through suffering?
24. Anger is a spiritual disease. We choose the path of illness all the more easily when we do not recognize that God seeks to train us in the situation we are in, not the situation we wish we were in.
25. It is easier not to be angry when we recognize that God knows what he is doing in the situations he allows us to be in. The situation may be temptation and trial, but was God impotent, unwise, or unloving in how he handled St. Job?
26. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds by any means. We live instead in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods. And that is the greater blessing.
27. Some very holy men no longer struggle spiritually because spiritual struggle has worked out completely. But for the rest of us, struggle is a normal state. It is a problem for you or I to pass Lent without struggle. If we struggle and stumble and fall, that is good news. All the better if we cannot see how the thrusts and blows of the enemy's sword burnish away a little rust,

one imperceptible speck at a time.

28. Do you ask, "Did it have to hurt *that* much?" When I have asked that question, I have not found a better answer than, "I do not understand," and furthermore, "Do I understand better than God?"
29. We seek happiness on terms that make success and happiness utterly impossible. God destroys our plans so that we might have the true happiness that is blessedness.
30. Have a good struggle.
31. There is no road to blessedness but the royal road of affliction that befits God's sons. Consider it pure joy when you fall into different trials and temptations. If you have trouble seeing why, read the Book of James.
32. Treasures on earth fail. Treasures in Heaven are more practical.
33. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for what good you do. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is how the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.
34. If you have hard memories, they too are a part of the arena. Forgive and learn to thank God for painful memories.
35. Remember that you will die, and live in preparation for that moment. There is much more life in mindfully dying each day than in heedlessly banishing from your mind the reality. Live as men

condemned to die, made a spectacle before men and angels.

36. Live your life out of prayer.

37. It takes a lifetime of faith to trust that God always answers prayers: he answers either "Yes, here is what you asked," or "No, here is something better." And to do so honestly can come from the struggle of praying your heart out and wondering why God seemed to give no answer and make no improvements to your and others' pain.

38. In the Bible, David slew Goliath. In our lives, David *sometimes* prevails against Goliath, but often not. Which is from God? Both.

39. Struggling for the greater good is a process of at once trying to master, and to get oneself out of the way. Struggle hard enough to cooperate with God when he rips apart your ways of struggling to reach the good.

40. Hurting? What can you do to help others?

The Best Things in Life Are Free

1. The best things in life are free.
2. The best things in life are free. But what does this mean?
3. The best things in life are free. But we do not understand the truth of these words if we think they are filled out by hugs and friendship, or even love: If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.
4. A better lens comes from the condemnation of the Pharisees: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean.
5. It appears in Orthodoxy that the outside of the chalice is all feasts and beautiful liturgies, even during Lent: but on the inside is all repentance, deprivation and hardship, and being blindsided by

rebukes. All of this falls under "The best things in life are free," the one as much as the other.

6. Well enough it may be said that sin is the forerunner of sorrow: "The wages of sin is death," and that death's sorrow begins here and now. Sin ultimately kills pleasure: It takes humility to enjoy even pride. It takes sobriety to enjoy even drunkenness. It takes chastity to enjoy even lust.
7. But this is not all. The outside of the cup is beautiful and its beauty is true and real. But the real treasure is inside. Repentance is a spiritual awakening; it terrifies because it seems that when we repent we will lose a shining part of ourselves forever, but when we repent we suddenly realize, "*I was holding on to a piece of Hell!*" and are free to flee the stench. What feast compares to the grandeur of real repentance?
8. The Great High Priest said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." The best things in life are free, and this pruning is a very big free gift.
9. It is when we are cleansed inside the cup that the outside is clean. Let Christ cleanse us inside the cup, and then inside and outside will both bear proper fruit.
10. The things in life that are free are persecutions, and we have on the highest authority: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in

heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

11. St. Paul goes so far to say, “But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.”
12. We may approach the outside of the chalice first, but it is a loss to stop there. We need the joyful sorrow of compunction and all that is within the chalice, and then what is on the outside of the chalice will be clean, and what is more, will reach its proper stature.
13. Every day take a little less, and pare down a little more. The Fathers do warn, "Do not engage in warfare beyond your strength," and the praxis is to crawl before we try to walk. But The Way of the Ascetic pares down, little by little, in humor, in luxury, in eating for a purpose other than nourishment, and aims to have none of it left.
14. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. And by faith we wean ourselves even from a life centered on innocent pleasures, knowing that they do not hold a candle to the spiritual pleasure that is inside the chalice.
15. The cutting of of one's own will is free. And it is the experience of monasticism that this is one of the best

things in life: a monk's will is cut off, not for the primary benefit of his brother monks, but for his own benefit. And the voluntary and involuntary cutting off of one's will extends far outside the monastery. It is one of the best things in life, whether we accept it as a blessing or resent it because we do not wish to grow up in the spiritual life.

16. Do you wish that this chalice be taken from you? Christ prayed the same, but he also prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done." For some prayers are impossible.
17. There are two answers to prayer: "Yes," and "No, please ask for something better." St. James writes, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." Passions are sinful habits that warp us, and when we ask for something to satisfy our passions, God only ever says "No" because he wants better for us.
18. Those things that are obviously good are nothing compared to the terrible goods: *the gilded artwork outside the chalice is beautiful enough, but it is nothing next to what is inside the chalice.*
19. The Maximum Christ wishes the maximum for our lives, and that comes through repentance and the royal road of affliction.
20. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for Christ's sake. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is now the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.

21. No one can harm the man who does not injure himself. *Nor can any circumstance.* So therefore let us not be governed by circumstances, or think the less of our God when he allows us rougher circumstances.
22. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but there is another shoe to drop. We live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that is a greater good.
23. Perhaps we are entering a time of struggle. (*Entering?*) Perhaps we are seeing the end of exceptionally prosperous and easy days we have no right reason to expect. The same truths apply. The same God who reigns in easy times, reigns in hard times.
24. "Give us this day our daily bread:" it is normal not to know where your next meal is from.
25. The arm of the Lord is more visible, not less, in hard times. God's providence is stronger when you know you need it.
26. The chalice offered us indeed looks easy on the outside but is full of pain within. But the sufferings are part of the treasure. And the best things in life reach deeper than the golden ornaments that belong on the outside, but extend to the joyful sadnesses within. Those who shed at least some entertainment and seek repentance and compunction for their sins find repentance an awakening and compunction to be joyful and cleansing. And that is not all. Everything inside the cup runs deep. And everything inside the cup is free.

27. The divine sovereignty is never purchased at the expense of human freedom. Human freedom is limited, but this is not where divine sovereignty comes from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely choice has been made, and the divine sovereignty shapes joy after every draught of the inexhaustible cup.
28. The joy of the best things in life is not purchased at the expense of the chalice of suffering. Suffering is limited, but this is not something the divine sovereignty is purchased from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely suffering has been entered, and the divine sovereignty leaves people in a better place than had they not met their sufferings.
29. The divine life is now. The divine energies are now. Not later, once some difficulties are resolved, but now.
30. In ancient times the holiday of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were celebrated together; even now there is not a separation between them, and we speak of a three-day Pascha. There is no real separation between bearing a cross and being crowned with a crown, even if it takes time to gain the eyes of faith to see such things.
31. Orthodox are iconodules, but God is both iconodule and iconoclast: he takes things in our life and makes them icons of himself, and he also keeps on destroying and removing things to make us more free to breathe. Heaven and Hell are both inside us, and God seeks to inhabit Heaven inside of us and uproot Hell.

32. God the Father is the maker of all things visible and invisible. God is spirit, and even among created things the first excellence belongs to the invisible. Who can buy or sell invisible things? This is one reason the best things in life are free.
33. In the Incarnation, Heaven kissed earth and the visible now has a share in the excellence of the invisible. But still if a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned: the sale of relics is forbidden.
34. Do you believe the best things in life are free?
Excellent, but “the demons believe—and shudder.”
Do you *live* as if the best things in life are free?
35. “It is more blessed to give than receive.” What do you have to give?
36. If you covet something and you gain it, it will bring misery once the pleasure melts away, and the greater the covetousness, the greater the misery.
Covetousness is the inverse of what is inside the cup.
37. We want to have things our way. But the Lord has other plans. And what we will find if we yield is that he has other plans for us that are not what we would have chosen, but are far better. This is at once an easy and a hard thing to do.
38. In the Bible a chalice is both a cup of suffering to drink and a cup which fills with excellent joy. The suffering is as bad as we fear—no, worse— but if we drink of it we will be drinking of the very best things in life. The divine life in the chalice immeasurably eclipses the gilt ornament outside of it.

Rememberance of death, compunction, and repentance dig deeper than the music of liturgy.

39. The best things in life are not just an ornament for when our material needs are well taken care of. It is true ten times more that they are lifeblood in hard times and harder times. And the chalice is inexhaustible.
40. The best things in life are free.

How to Survive an Economic Depression

Want to survive?

I learned some pretty big things during the Y2k scare, and some of them have every relevance to how to survive an economic depression.

When year 2000 was approaching, I was part of the doomsday camp. I believed, wrongly, that technology would fail and everything around me would start to fall apart. But did a lot of digging and I think I learned something about what makes people survive really rough situations--and how to survive an economic depression. The economy is in deep trouble, and what I found out then has every relevance now that we are worried about how to survive an economic depression.

When Y2k was approaching, I found a lot of materials on *physical* preparation for such an event, but very little on *psychological* preparation. The most that I can remember reading about that was that when I said on a newsgroup that a Y2k doomsday would be psychologically as well as physically difficult, someone said that I was right and suggested that Y2k preparations include stocking up on

board games and condoms.

That answer seemed, to put it politely, not up to snuff. As far as mental preparation goes, that was the equivalent of saying, "If bad things happen on January 1 2000, be prepared for great physical danger. *Always* remember to look both ways before you cross the street!"

After failing to find something more informative on newsgroups, I went to the library, to look for more information on psychological survival in difficult situations. I did a lot of digging, reading whatever seemed like it might shed light, but finding very little of an answer *anywhere* that I looked. Even a book on psychology and the military said almost nothing about how either soldiers or civilians stood up psychologically to disaster, or what enables a survivor to overcome an incredibly difficult situation.

It was only after a lot of digging that I realized the answer was almost staring me in the face. What makes a survivor is not exactly *psychological*. It is *spiritual*. There was something spiritual about, for instance, people who had survived incredibly hostile situations as hostages and prisoners. It is not exactly that they had some special talent, or drew on some special mind trick or had developed what we would imagine as spiritual powers. It was something almost *pedestrian*.

It had something to do with religious devotion. Faith has something to do with how to survive an economic depression.

I imagine I may raise some eyebrows by suggesting faith has something to do with how to survive a disaster. But faith was how many people survived the Great Depression. Perhaps a great many survivors survived despite their useless faith, or maybe it was a crutch, but if it seems obvious to you that faith could have nothing to do with how people survived the Great Depression, then I would ask you to entertain a possibility you might not have considered. Maybe they know something we have forgotten.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Much of the Bible comes from disastrous times. In the Bible's book of Habakkuk, there is a prophet who sees great evil about him. He cries out to the Lord, and the Lord gives an answer that leaves the prophet stunned: the Lord will punish the wickedness of Israel by having an army of terrorists conquer their land. This was a disaster that might be worse than economic collapse. The prophet asks the Lord a question: how can a righteous God look on such wickedness? And the Lord responds without really answering the prophet's question: the Lord responds without giving the prophet what he wants. But tucked away in the Lord's response are some very significant words: "...the righteous shall live by faith."

Those words were taken up in the New Testament and became a rallying-cry against rigid legalism. But they are more than a response to people who turn religion into a bunch of rules; they speak also in situations where legalism is simply not the issue. The prophet cried out to the Lord about rampant violence. The issue was not really legalism at all. And this is when the words were first spoken: "The righteous shall live by faith." These words were given in terrifying times.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is a non-answer, and a quite deliberate non-answer. The prophet asked how such a pure God could allow such wickedness to exist, and God does not give the answer he is looking for. The Lord doesn't really answer the prophet's question at *all*. It's almost like:

Someone said to a master, "What about the people who have never heard of Christ? Are they all automatically damned to Hell? Tell me; I have heard that you have studied this question."

The master said, "What you need to be saved is for

you to believe in Christ, and you have heard of him."

The Lord doesn't tell the prophet what he wants. He gives him something much better; these brief words say, "I AM WHO I AM, and I will do what I will do, and you may not look past the protecting veil that enshrouds me. But in the disastrous times you face, know this: the righteous shall live by faith."

God doesn't just refuse to tell the prophet what he *wants*. He gives Habakkuk something fundamentally richer and deeper. He tells the prophet what he *needs*. What God tells Habakkuk, "The righteous shall live by faith," is a luminous thread appearing throughout Scripture, woven into the fabric of Proverbs and woven through and through in the Sermon on the Mount. This luminous, radiant thread declares that God is sovereign, in hard times as well as good, and that his divine providence is with his faithful no less. *Even if we are in a depression, God can watch out for us.* (Perhaps *especially* if we are in a depression. The surprising report from many survivors is that God's help is much more obvious in hard times than when things are easy.) Just witness this luminous thread in the Sermon on the Mount:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall wear. Is there not more to life than food, and more to the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add one hour to his span of life? (You might as well try to worry yourself into

being a foot and a half taller!) And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither work nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as gloriously as one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For people without faith seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own things to worry about. Each day has enough worries of its own.

The righteous shall live by faith, and the Sermon on the Mount has a great deal to say about exactly *how* the righteous shall live by faith. The radiant thread unfolds, unfurls, *beams*, "Money is unworthy of your trust: put your trust in God. Live in the security of faith. Have the true security of faith in God who provides, not the ersatz providence of what you can arrange for yourself. Do not spend your life building a sandcastle for your home and trying to keep it from collapsing. I offer you a way to build a solid house, built on the rock."

And this is not just a statement about how we should not worry about the future when we have it easy. The Sermon on the Mount closes with words that are entirely relevant to surviving the storms of life when we wonder how to survive an economic depression:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came,

and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and its collapse was great.

These are not words about nothing more than how to relax and enjoy life when it is easy. These are words about how to prepare for hard times, and how to survive in a disaster. In other words, they are words about how to survive an economic depression.

In hard times as well as good, *the righteous shall live by faith*. Indeed, the words "the righteous shall live by faith" originally come from times with an industrial-strength disaster on the horizon!

The Apostle Paul: Portrait of a survivor!

Who can survive stress like an industrial-strength disaster? The Bible paints a picture of one person who survived a lot of really rough times, and not only *survived*, but genuinely *thrived*.

When I was in college, part of the general "foundations of wellness" class was taking the Holmes Stress Point Scale, which assigns points for stressful events to add up to a rough estimate of how stressful your life is. You get a certain number of points for each stressful experience you've been through, and they add up to your total score for how stressful the past year of your life is. The events include:

- Jail term...
- Death of a close friend...

- Outstanding personal achievement...
- Vacation...
- Christmas...
- Minor violation of the law...

The higher a score from stressful events, the more stressful your life is. The scale's explanation is: *If your score is 300 or more, you are at a very high stress level and probably run a major risk of illness in the next year. If your score is 200 to 299, your stress and illness risk are moderate, and if your score is between 150 to 200, your stress and risk are mild.*

My teacher mentioned that one student had computed such a score for a year in the life of the Apostle Paul, who went through a number of events that should score major points for stress:

- Jailed...
- Attacked by a frenzied mob...
- Shipwrecked in the mother of all storms...
- Clandestine escape from a city when people were trying to kill him...
- Physically assaulted by soldiers...
- Survived an assassination attempt...

The student calculated a staggering 675 points for one year in the life of St. Paul!

But the odd thing is that if you read the Book of Acts, St.

Paul does not really come across as someone we should pity. We read that some of his colleagues were harassed, beaten, and afterwards were rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of their Lord. When I read the accounts of these events, I walk away with a sense, not that these suffering heroes are poor and pitiable, but that they are giants and they utterly dwarf me. There is something greater in the Apostle, far greater, than a whopping 675 points worth of *externally* stressful events.

It is the same thing, really, as with people who survived a long time being hostages for terrorists. They had dug deep and built their house on the rock, and when stormwinds battered their house, it survived and stood firm. It is the same thing for the bedrock of how people survived the Great Depression. And if we may be battered by hard economic times, we would like our houses to stand firm as well.

Suffering and sonship

It may be that what we fear that in a potential disaster is that we will lose what is good for us. We may fear getting sidetracked when none of our dreams seem to come true. We may fear that God cannot really provide our good if our recession becomes a depression or even an economic collapse--that the Sermon on the Mount is presumably about how to live in easy times but wouldn't be quite so helpful when we're in a depression. But there is something we are missing. Some of the things that we fear may have a surprisingly positive place in a well-lived life. There is something we are missing in all this.

Suffering has a place in the divine discipleship—the divine sonship—that the Sermon on the Mount is all about. "The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God," as C.S. Lewis echoed the ancient wisdom, a wisdom that plays out in discipleship. Discipleship, service to God in difficulties, providence, and ascetical or spiritual

practices all come together: God provides for us and disciplines us in hard times as well as good. Sometimes he provides more plainly when we have nothing than when we have everything. In the *Philokalia*, we hear the words of St. Makarios as he explains the place of suffering in discipleship:

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast

accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The story is told of a woman who was told the Lord would be with her, and afterwards found herself an incredibly painful situation. When she cried out to the Lord and asked how this could be, the Lord answered: "I never said it would be easy. I said I'd be *with* you." God's way, it seems, is not to make things easy for us, but to strengthen

us for greatness in what are often hard situations, and sometimes disasters. He gives us mountains to climb and the strength for climbing.

And we can climb mountains even if we are in an economic depression. Perhaps *especially* if we are in an economic recession. God's providence does not spare us from our suffering. Not even if we're really good Christians—*especially* not if we're really good Christians! If you read the saints' lives, you will see that even with all the wondrous providence God provides for the saints, the saints in fact suffer much *more* than the rest of us; they know sufferings worse than most of us have ever been through.

There are saints whose prayers healed others—but who were for themselves never healed of their own major illnesses. If this sounds ironic, remember that Christ also was told, "Physician, heal thyself." Christ is pre-eminent as one who saved others but could not save himself, and "He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is one way of *defining* God's kingdom. Part of how people survived the Great Depression was that they carried the spirit of God's kingdom and worked to save others, and not just themselves. Communities of people survived the Great Depression because, even if no one could save "Me! Me! Me!", perhaps each one could help save *others*.

God's providence does not spare us from our suffering, but he works with us *in* our suffering, often to do things with us that could never happen if we had things our way. It may be precisely *on* the mountain, *in* the act of climbing, that God gives us the strength to climb!

Sometimes God works with us despite our best efforts to fix things so we can have things our way. Wise people rightly tells us, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans," and "You can't always get what you want." And perhaps if we did get what we wanted, we wouldn't get what God wanted for us. Some of us may try to fix our problems and pray to God to take them away—when his plan is to use our problems to build us up. St. Makarios

above quotes Hebrews, and in fact Hebrews is one of the clearest books of the Bible that God works with us in suffering—in fact, that Christ himself was perfected by suffering (source):

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. Therefore, holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.

...But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great

reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Our view of suffering is often that if we are suffering, then we cannot be where we should be. It often seems we can only be where we should be when we are *out* of a difficult situation). It seems that we are sidetracked, and will only stop being sidetracked when we have things our way. But that is absolutely false. God worked with Christ in suffering. God worked with the saints in suffering. God worked with us in suffering. And that means that we can be in suffering and in pain, with our godly plans failing, and we are still just where God wants us: we may not see it, but sometimes our earthly failure is a heavenly victory. If God allows us to be in an economic collapse, he may be doing things with us, good things, that we might never happen if we had the comfort we seem to need. The last words above, about suffering and failure, lead *directly* into the famous "faith hall of fame" in Hebrews 11.

What may be happening in our sufferings is that God is building us into greater people than if we succeed in getting what we want. Including if we are in an economic depression. This is a basic lesson of people growing up: many young people have big dreams for themselves, but grow by middle age into living for others, growing into something that could never happen if all their youthful dreams came true. And suffering has a place in this—and a greater and deeper value. The Son of God was made perfect through suffering. Innocent suffering is sharing in the suffering of Christ: Christ's suffering is made perfect in his people. St. Paul, the survivor who went through terrible suffering, wrote, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." (Col 1.24 RSV)

Suffering is *not* getting off-track, nor does it force us out of God's plans, so that we only get into God's providence as soon as things are the way we would like. What some of us

fear in suffering is that if we are in difficult circumstances, then that must mean we are spiritual failures as well as failing on earth. If we are faithful and still fail in our plans, this does not mean that either God's plans or providence have failed. Often he is working at us when we are suffering and we are so far afield from anything that makes sense to us.

Everything we meet is either a blessing from God, or a trial that God allows for our strengthening. You may say that there is something evil in your trials, and you would be entirely right: there is something evil, and perhaps demonic, in our trials and afflictions. Perhaps you may say that there seems to be something almost demonic about an economic collapse, and you would still be right. But, as C.S. Lewis observes, *all of us do the will of God*. We may do the will of God as Satan and Judas did, as *instruments*, or we may do the will of God as Peter and John did, as *sons*. But all of us do the will of God, and ultimately Satan and may be no more than a hammer in God's hand. And even if God allows rough trials, he allows them for our strengthening. St. Makarios is very clear: "The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to." Evil is on a leash. Let us be faithful. Every move the Devil plays is one move closer to his loss and God's victory, and ours if we are faithful.

I am not saying that the future holds much suffering. You or I may have a lot of suffering, or actually not that much. I am, however, saying that however much suffering God allows, he can still work with us. He can still work with us in an economic depression. (And that is even *without* going into how a great many people have been in situations they dreaded, and found life to still be beautiful.) As St. Paul, a survivor, closed Romans 8:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or
famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is

written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Building a house on the rock—*it's not all about you!*

Ascesis refers to disciplined spiritual practice. It's a part of building a house on the rock. In the Orthodox tradition, these include sacraments, church attendance and daily liturgical prayers, reading and listening to Scripture, working to keep the Jesus prayer in your heart ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), growing into the liturgical seasons and internal and external fasting, hospitality, service, thanksgiving, repentance, giving to others who ask your help, cutting back on selfish pleasures, including icons in your prayer, solitude, community, and other practices. All of these can offer different help in growing to spiritual maturity.

But there comes a crucial caveat. None of these, if they are working correctly, are all about us. However essential they are to building a house on the rock, they are infinitely more than tools for how to survive an economic depression. They are tools to living in communion with God and being transformed by his grace. These disciplines, used rightly, can clear away obstacles to our growing in discipleship under God, but if they are used wrongly, they can be extremely harmful.

Using ascetical practices wrongly, as ends in

themselves, has the same problem as Eeyore in *The House at Pooh Corner*:

[Piglet picked some violets, decided to give them to Eeyore, and went to visit him.]

"Oh, Eeyore," began Piglet a little nervously, because Eeyore was busy.

"To-morrow," said Eeyore. "Or the next day." Piglet came a little closer to see what it was. Eeyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind.

"Oh, Eeyore," he began again, "I just—"

"Is that little Piglet?" said Eeyore, still looking hard at his sticks.

"Yes, Eeyore, and I—"

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," said Piglet.

"It's an A."

"Oh," said Piglet.

"Not O—A," said Eeyore severely. "Can't you hear, or do you think you have more education than Christopher Robin?"

"Yes," said Piglet. "No," said Piglet very quickly, and he came closer still.

"Christopher Robin said it was an A, and an A it is—until somebody treads on it," Eeyore added sternly.

Piglet jumped backwards hurriedly, and smelt at his violets.

"Do you know what A means, little Piglet?"

"No, Eeyore, I don't."

"It means Learning, it means Education, it means all the things that you and Pooh haven't got. That's what A means."

"Oh," said Piglet again. "I mean, does it?" he

explained quickly.

"I'm telling you. People come and go in this Forest, and they say, 'It's only Eeyore, so it doesn't count.' They walk to and fro saying 'Ha ha!' But do they know anything about A? They don't. It's just three sticks to them. But to the Educated—mark this, little Piglet—to the Educated, not meaning Poohs and Piglets, it's a great and glorious A. Not," he added, "just something that anybody can come and breathe on."

Piglet stepped back nervously, and looked round for help.

"Here's Rabbit," he said gladly. "Hallo, Rabbit."

Rabbit came up importantly, nodded to Piglet, and said, "Ah, Eeyore," in the voice of one who would be saying "Good-bye" in about two more minutes.

"There's just one thing I wanted to ask you, Eeyore. What happens to Christopher Robin in the mornings nowadays?"

"What's this that I'm looking at?" said Eeyore, still looking at it.

"Three sticks," said Rabbit promptly.

"You see?" said Eeyore to Piglet. He turned to Rabbit. "I will now answer your question," he said solemnly.

"Thank you," said Rabbit.

"What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becomes Educated. He instigates—I think that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else—he instigates Knowledge. In my small way, I also, if I have the word right, am—am doing what he does. That, doe instance is?"

"An A," said Rabbit, "but not a very good one. Well, I must get back and tell the others."

Eeyore looked at his sticks and then he looked at Piglet.

"What did Rabbit say it was?" he asked.

"An A," said Piglet.

"Did you tell him?"

"No, Eeyore, I didn't. I expect he just knew."

"He knew? You mean this A thing is a thing Rabbit knew?"

"Yes, Eeyore. He's very clever, Rabbit is."

"Clever!" said Eeyore scornfully, putting a foot heavily on his three sticks. "Education!" said Eeyore bitterly, jumping on his six sticks. "What is Learning?" asked Eeyore as he kicked his twelve sticks into the air. "A thing Rabbit knows! Ha!"

We need to avoid being Eeyores with our spiritual discipline, or our spirituality, or our faith, or our religion. Letters serve a greater purpose, and so do ascetical practices: we should not, like Eeyore, stare at an A and tell ourselves that it is our Education and Learning, or Prayers and Church Attendance as the case may be.

The point of ascetical practices is to be steps of the Great Dance: living the life that God shares, and becoming one of the sons of God. It's not merely a set of survival skills that work in an economic recession or depression, or even an economic collapse, even if "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own," is quite practical advice. The point is to seek first the kingdom of a God who knows our survival needs: as God told Habakkuk before a disaster, "The righteous shall live by faith." The luminous thread beams brightly because it is more than just a white thread. It *shines*, and it shines with the light of Heaven, a light of divine love that illumines Creation.

What Eeyore doesn't get about the luminous thread is that it is the light of Heaven shining on earth.

Better than an endowment

Some years before I became Orthodox, I was at a class

where someone was commenting on Proverbs, and its texts that say, in essence, "Put your trust in God, not money." ("Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," Prov 11:4 RSV.) One point he made that particularly surprised me was, "Endowments aren't so great."

He asked a question: if we want to be independently wealthy, who do we want the "independently" to mean we are independent from? The answer he gave: "*Independent from God.*" If we want to be independently wealthy, we may want something more than mere luxuries. The basic fantasy of life as we imagine ourselves being independently wealthy, is a life that is in control and unlike the actual messiness of our real lives with so many things that are simply beyond our control. And his suggestion, based on real life as well as Proverbs, is that it is actually not good for us to have an endowment that we can trust.

One kind of person counselors work with is the person who cannot be happy without being in control of everyone around them. The basic problem is that a person who needs to be in control is a tragically shrunken person, and part of what a counselor will try to give a person is an opportunity to step into a larger world. If you believe, "I can't be happy unless I'm in control of everyone I'm involved with," that will set you up for a lot of unhappiness.

This is not just because it is really hard to control everyone else. A few people who want to control others really do manage to control others around them, but they are really as unhappy as others who want the same thing but don't manage the control over others they always want to establish. As Chesterton observed, there may be some desires which are not achievable, but there *are* some desires which are not *desirable*.

If you want the world to be small enough that there is nothing outside your control, you want to live in a small and terribly shrunken world. If you let go of that kind of control, you may find that you have let yourself into a much bigger

world than if you were the biggest thing around, and in the process you become bigger yourself. Instead of being a tin god ruling a world as cramped as a cubicle, you become servant in God's vast mansions. And being one of many of these servants is a much better position to be in than dominating as a tin god.

And there is more to this larger world, the larger world of serving in God's great mansions. The words, "The righteous shall live by faith" were given, in full force, when a brutal invasion was coming. Those words may not originally have been about how to survive an economic depression. They were originally more about how to survive something worse: your country being taken over by terrorists!

The words, "The righteous shall live by faith," and the Sermon on the Mount, apply to some pretty rough situations, *including* an economic recession, economic depression, or economic collapse. Christ's words about not worrying do not apply just to privileged people who have nothing seriously worth worrying about; many of the people who first heard the Sermon on the Mount were on the *bottom* of the totem pole and would see less material comfort than the kind of person most Americans would imagine as a homeless person.

The model prayer Christ would give is not a prayer for something nicer for people stuck on a nasty diet of burgers and KFC; the one physical request is for *bread*—by American standards, quite a dull thing to eat day in and day out, and possibly poorer nutritional fare than fast food—and it is in *this* context that Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, beckons us to store up treasure in Heaven, and invites us to a spiritual feast that unfurls in hard times as well as when everything meets our expectations. He invites us to the spiritual feast, the larger world, that is at the heart of spirituality and religion and is unlocked by faith. The Sermon on the Mount neither assumes nor needs a high standard of living to have real treasure.

The invitation to dance the Great Dance is open to us

now as ever. All of us are invited to the Great Feast. Even if we've snubbed words like, "Money doesn't make you happy," and, "The best things in life are free," not only do those truths remain open to us, but the Divine Providence is no less open. If our external circumstances remove all the luxuries that serve us, we may discover that not only is it better to give than receive, but it is also better to serve and be served. We might take a tip from how people survived the Great Depression. If we are unemployed, we might serve others and find something that technologies and luxuries can't give, and if our 401(k) plan becomes a 404(k) and vanishes, we might lean on God's providence and discover that God's providence gives us more than money could.

There's a sign that was seen around my hometown that says, "Money may not do everything, but it sure keeps the kids in touch!" And I wonder if that is precisely what we gain if we do not know what will meet our needs in the future: our material needs can "keep the kids in touch" for God. Especially in an economy in shambles. And if that happens, we have something no money could buy: keeping in touch with God in a way that is ultimately a Heavenly transformation.

The prodigal son: "I wish you were dead!"

The parable of the prodigal son begins:

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in

that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the husks that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, `How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, `Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, `Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Today, one of the ways parents might give money to children is letting them "borrow against their inheritance:" they wouldn't have to pay the money back, but they lose that much of their inheritance when their parents die. And this is considered a fairly normal arrangement.

This *isn't* what is going on here. The younger son's request telegraphs something loud and clear: "I wish you were dead!"

We see a first glimpse of God's love—a love to the point of madness. Out of all responses the father could have to this affront, he gave every last penny he was asked for. The love to the point of madness may be easier to see later on, but it is already present in the gift by which he answers the

ludicrously inappropriate request.

The son goes off to live life the way he wants to. And living life the way he wants to hits rock bottom. The big party he imagined he'd make for himself turns into famine and dire straits that leave him coveting the unappetizing husks that he is feeding to unclean, vile swine. He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots, not his father.

He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots. Just like some of us here. We don't want to have to wait under the authority of a Father who calls the shots. We want money and control, with things lined up here and now. What is it we are telling God if we ask him to give us money and control on our terms? Something a bit like, "I wish you were dead."

The younger son has discovered that life with his father out of the picture is not so glorious and wonderful. And he realizes the extent of his fall. So he resolves to go back and beg, not even for forgiveness, but possibly his father might even contain his wounded resentment enough to let him work for pay and be able to buy bread. (Who knows? Maybe a long shot, but what real alternative did he have?)

What was the father doing in all of this?

When husbands have gone off to war, there have been wives who have stood by the path of the doorway, looking for some hope that their husbands may return, looking and waiting, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... *never* giving up! And the father in our story was doing *exactly* that.

The father was looking, waiting, and saw his son far off, and completely cast off his upper-class dignity to run and embrace him. Love to the point of madness! He didn't even wait for an apology before embracing him and kissing him!

And when the son made a full confession, hoping maybe to toil for his father's scraps, the father pulls out all the stops: the best robe, a ring for his finger, and the best food possible for a royal feast. *This is love to the point of*

madness!

But the story continues on to a more sobering note:

Now his older son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, 'Look, I have served you for all of these years, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a goat kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

We have an Eeyore here.

This story has been called the parable of the two prodigals, meaning that not only did the one son tragically fall, but the other, elder son also tragically falls from the glory his father would have wished for him. At the beginning, the younger son wished that his father was dead. At the end, did the older son wish his father was dead?

The older son is a tragic spiritual Eeyore.

His statement could have come from a very different angle. For all of the years the older son was in his father's service, he toiled, and he may not have had rich party food—only solid, nourishing, ordinary food day by day. For all these many years, he worked hard in the context of the father training him, and drawing him into mature manhood. In the meantime, his brother has been ripping up

his own soul, losing even what he thought he had at the mercy of merciless people with no one else who cared for his well-being. The brother who all but told his father, "I wish you were dead," was in every sense save the literal, himself *dead*.

If it is painful to lose one's parents, it is another level of pain to lose one's child, and the father had seen one of his sons—not to mention the older son's only brother—die a living death. Now he was back, and in every sense *including* the literal, alive. Was killing the fatted calf even *enough* of a celebration?

The older son didn't get it. How well did his service to his father work? Not very well; it went badly enough that instead of sharing in his father's joy at a lost son who "was dead, and is alive again," acts bitterly affronted and indicts his father searingly. Which is to say, the son's hard work didn't *work*, any more than Eeyore's laborious staring at his three sticks achieved the true heart of "Learning" and "Education."

The point, though, is not really the tragedy of the older son. The point is that God welcomes people who turn to him, and welcomes them with open arms. It is only one step to turn to God, even if you think you are ten thousand steps away. But when are we ready?

It is easy enough to wait for life to *really* begin. When? Maybe when the present illness is gone, or when we get that promotion, or maybe just when we get a job in the first place, or when someone we deal with will become not quite so difficult a person, or when we have something paid off, or when Washington gets its act together. When something big or small changes, *then* maybe we will be in God's blessing. St. Herman of Alaska met some people who were waiting for their lives to *really* begin:

Father Herman gave them all one general question: "Gentlemen, what do you love above all, and what will each of you wish for your happiness?"

Various answers were offered... Some desired wealth, others glory, some a beautiful wife, and still others a beautiful ship he would captain; and so forth in the same vein. "Is it not true," Father Herman said to them concerning this, "that all your various wishes can bring us to one conclusion - that each of you desires that which in his own understanding he considers the best, and which is most worthy of his love?" They all answered, "Yes, that is so!" He then continued, "Would you not say, 'Is not that which is best, above all, and surpassing all, and that which by preference is most worthy of love, the Very Lord, our Jesus Christ, who created us, adorned us with such ideals, gave life to all, sustains everything, nurtures and loves all, who is Himself Love and most beautiful of all men?' Should we not then love God above everything, desire Him more than anything, and search him out?"

All said, "Why, yes! That's self-evident!" Then the Elder asked, "But do you love God?" They all answered, "Certainly, we love God. How can we not love God?" "And I a sinner have been trying for more than forty years to love God, I cannot say that I love Him completely," Father Herman protested to them. He then began to demonstrate to them the way in which we should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always remember them; we try to please them. Day and night our heart is concerned with the subject. Is that the way you gentlemen love God? Do you turn to Him often? Do you always remember Him? Do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments?" They had to admit that they did not! "For our own good, and for our own fortune," continued the Elder, "let us at least promise ourselves that from this very minute we will try to love God more than anything and to fulfill His Holy Will!"

The time for God is not at some indefinite point in the

future when things will fit our hopes better. The time to work with God, in a sense the only time we should be concerned with, is now. Not later, *now*.

More precious than gold

When I was a child, I remembered a story about a fearsome dragon who told a knight that if the knight would tickle the dragon's throat with a sword, he would have a great treasure. The knight rode up on his horse and approached the dragon, already afraid, and asked if the treasure was as good as a good horse and a good suit of armor. It was more, the dragon said. The knight asked if the treasure was as good as a silver suit of armor, and shield and sword to match. It was, the dragon assured him. The knight then asked if the treasure was better than gold. The dragon answered that it was more precious than rooms full of gold. So the terrified knight trembled and tickled the dragon's throat with his sword, and asked what the treasure was. And the dragon turned and ripped the knight's sword out of his hand, breathing out a tremendous deluge of fire and smoke and roared, "Your *life*!" And the terrified knight, having lost his sword, fled as best he could, and grasped a treasure far more precious than rooms and rooms full of gold.

Hard times may still let us know what is truly important, and what is truly treasure.

Even if we are in an economic depression, we have a treasure worth more than rooms and rooms full of gold: our lives.

For the righteous who walk by faith, hard times may even turn out to be good times.

St. John Chrysostom once wrote to people who think they are somebody if they conspicuously ride on a horse and have an armed servant clear the way before them, and told them that they were missing something and have *all* the wrong priorities. These words seem like they have nothing

to do with how to survive in an economic depression—but on a very deep level, they have *everything* to do with how to survive in an economic depression where we may lose any number of things that seem so essential. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

And I know that I am disgusting my hearers. But what can I do? I have set my mind on this and will not stop saying these things, whether or not anything comes of it. For what is the point of having someone clear the way before you in the marketplace? Are you walking among wild beasts so that you need to drive away those who meet you? Do not be afraid of the people who approach you and walk near you; none of them bite. But why do you consider it an insult to walk alongside other people? What craziness is this, what ludicrous folly, when you don't mind having a horse follow close behind you, but if it is a person, you think you are disgraced unless the person is driven a hundred miles away. And why do you have servants to carry horse _____, using the free as slaves, or rather yourself living more dishonorably than any slave? For truly, anyone who bears so much pride is more repulsive than any slave.

Therefore people who have enslaved themselves to this vile habit will never come within sight of true liberty. No, if you must drive away and clear away anything, do not let it be those who come near you, but your own pride. Do not do this by your servant, but by yourself, not by this material weapon, but by the spiritual one. Since now your servant drives away those who walk alongside you, but you yourself are driven from your rightful place by your own self-will, more disgracefully than any servant can drive your neighbor. But if, descending from your horse, you will drive away pride by humility, you will sit higher and place yourself in greater honor, without needing any

servant to do this for you. I mean that when you have become modest and walk on the ground, you will be seated on the horse-drawn carriage of humility which carries you up to the very heavens, the carriage with winged steeds: but if falling from the horse-drawn carriage of heaven, you pass into that of arrogance, you will be in no better state than crippled beggars who are carried along the ground—no, much more wretched and pathetic than they are: since they are carried because of their bodies' weakness, but you because of the disease of your own arrogance.

Some of us also need the carriage of humility, even if we are not even in a position to make everybody get out of our way. And some of us might benefit from the loving interdependence that was how people survived the Great Depression.

In tough times—and in tougher times—we may lose things we have set our hearts on, but it may be that however much we resist, God will give us something better. What if I lose my car, for instance? How could I get something better? But it is entirely possible that I could get something better than my present car. I might get something better than my own Rolls Royce, even better than my own private jet. I might get more *inter*-dependence, where *I* do not get around by what *I* do by *my* car. I may still be able to go places, but now by the love of my friends and family.

In that case, if I get some groceries, or a ride to church, I am not getting it as something run by me, me, me; I am riding on community and love. And the love of another who cares about me is a much bigger thing than economic self-sufficiency. It's the same thing as food tasting better if it is prepared with love for hospitality—then it isn't just food. You are, in a very real sense, eating a friend's love, and that is a richer and deeper kind of sustenance—and a richer, deeper, and fuller *goodness*!

Who knows? I might ride even higher than this if my

car is taken from me. Perhaps I might respond to the humiliation of losing my car by starting to let Christ chauffeur me to Heaven in the flying Rolls-Royce of humility. Maybe I might even start being grateful, and be carried by the car of gratitude, and look for ways that I might launch into the heavens on the immense celestial starship of service to others.

And it is the starship of service to others—of saving others even though I cannot save myself—that shines with celestial glory. "It is more blessed to give than to receive"—the Sermon on the Mount again. Perhaps I might stop thinking about my own survival and instead think about how I can save others even though I cannot save myself. Some people did not just survive the Great Depression; they learned that life is beautiful. They stopped being tin gods trying to rule over a shrunken world and became servants of God and each other in the vast mansions of a glorious God. In the Great Depression, they did not have gold, but they grasped a treasure vaster than rooms and rooms full of gold. For some, the Great Depression was a wakeup call to what is truly important in life.

And that is true wealth.

Why are some of us not living this way already? Repentance is terrifying. In the tale of the prodigal son, the son who had devoured his father's property was in far from his father's house, and had real work to get back. He had to *travel* in a much rougher sense than taking a plane, train, or bus, and faced much nastier dangers than "Dinner in New York, breakfast in London, luggage in Sydney."

Our word "travel" comes from the French *travailler*, referring to work, and not exactly easy work: with slightly different spelling, the same word appears in English as "travail," meaning a mother's struggle in childbirth. Travel was hard, gruelling, and dangerous labor, and not for the faint of heart. And the prodigal son undertook travel with far less of the strength—not to mention absolutely none of the wealth—by which he had gotten there. The feat would

have been comparable to running a marathon, or at least a marathon where your path might well go through the turf of thugs lying in wait and quite willing to kill anyone who would *travail* into their ambush.

And yet this is exactly what the prodigal son did. His brother may have done the ascetical work of prayers and fasting; but the younger son undertook something much tougher: repentance which is, in a spiritual sense, what the younger son did to return home.

Repentance has been called unconditional surrender. It has been called other things as well, and it terrifies: it is a decision to return home and beg for mercy when you have no grounds to expect to be treated like anything but the vilest of the scum of the earth. Perhaps the Father's love to the point of madness may respond otherwise when we have repented. Perhaps we when we surrender conditionally and expect to be razed to the ground, we find ourselves walking away triumphant victors whose refusal to surrender was holding on to defeat for dear life, terrified to let go of our defeat because we think it helps us. Perhaps we have nothing, really, to lose but our misery. But that isn't our concern when we need to repent.

But if we can repent—for all of us have much to repent of—and step into the Sermon on the Mount and begin to live by faith, then the Father's love will answer, and give us something better than whatever we grasp for in our forgetfulness that a provident God already knows our needs just as well in an economic depression as any other time. In an economic depression as much as any other time, the Father's love can meet these needs much better than we will if we control our inheritance ourselves.

In hard times in the past the Lord's arm and providence have shown more plainly than they sometimes do here. Do you want to know how to survive an economic depression? The answer is very simple. It's not a matter of what you arrange. It's a matter of what *God* provides. When there is no natural hope of God's saints being taken care of, it may

be a supernatural providence that we don't see as often when we have easy times.

In hard times as well as easy, the luminous thread woven throughout Scripture, appearing in one place in the words, "the just shall live by faith," and another place in a Sermon on the Mount that says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you"—this luminous thread is at the heart of faith, spirituality, and religion—and this luminous thread is more. It is a participation in the life of a God of love to the point of madness.

The luminous thread is spun by a God of love to the point of madness.

It may be in hard times that we fear that in hard times we will lose what is good for us.

But it may be that hard times, whether a recession, depression, or economic collapse, serve as a divinely given clue-by-four when we discover that the Father's love to the point of madness knows, and will give, what is much better for us. And on that point, I would like to quote a praise song about what is truly more precious than gold: the words go:

Lord, you are more precious than silver.

Lord, you are more costly than gold.

Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,

And nothing I desire compares to you.

In one variant, these words answer:

And the Father said:

"Child, you are more precious than silver.

Child, you are more costly than gold.

Child, you are more beautiful than diamonds,

And nothing I desire compares to you."

These are the words of divine love to the point of madness, of a God who loves saints and sinners alike, of a

God who rejoices more over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent. And this is a God who loves us in hard times as well as good, a God of providence who seeks our highest good whenever we turn to him.

God be merciful to us. (Amen!)

Death

In the time of life,
Prepare for death.

Dost thou love life?
Be thou of death ever mindful,
For the remembrance of death,
Better befits thee,
Than closing fast thine eyes,
That the snares before thee may vanish.
All of us are dying,
Each day, every hour, each moment,
Of death the varied microcosm,
The freedom given us as men,
To make a decision eternal,
The decision we build and make,
In each microcosm of eternity,
Until one day cometh our passing,
And what is now fluid,
Forever fixed will be made,
When we will trample down death by death,
Crying out from life to death,
O Death, where is thy victory?
O Grave, where is thy sting?
So even death and the grave,

Claim us to their defeat,
Or else,
After a lifetime building the ramp,
Having made earth infernal,
Closing bit by bit the gates of Hell,
Bolting and barring them from the inside,
We seal our decision,
Not strong enough to die rightly in life,
We sink to death in death,
Sealing ourselves twice dead.
Choolest thou this day,
Which thou shalt abide.

Seekest thou a mighty deed,
Our broken world to straighten out?
Seek it not! Knowest thou not,
That the accursed axe ever wielded in the West,
To transform society, with a program to improve,
Is a wicked axe, ever damned,
And hath a subtle backswing, and most grievous?
Wittest thou not that to heal in such manner,
Is like to bearing the sword,
To smite a dead man to life therewith?
Know rather the time-honeyed words,
True and healthgiving when first spoken,
Beyond lifesaving in our own time:
Save thyself,
And ten thousand around thee shall be saved.

We meet death in microcosm,
In the circumstances of our lives and the smallest decisions,
The decision, when our desire is cut off,
In anger to abide, or to be unperturbed.
Politeness to show to others, little things,
A rhythm of prayer to build up,
Brick by brick, even breath by breath,
Our mind to have on the things of Heaven or on earth,

A heart's answer of love and submission,
To hold when the Vinedresser takes knife to prune,
The Physician takes scalpel to ransack our wounds,
With our leave, to build us up,
Or to take the gold,
The price of our edification,
And buy demolition in its stead.
Right poetic and wondrous it may sound right now,
Right poetic and wondrous it is in its heart,
But it cometh almost in disguise,
From a God who wishes our humility never to bruise,
To give us better than we know to ask,
And until we see with the eyes of faith,
Our humble God allows it to seem certain,
That he has things wrong,
That we are not in the right circumstances for his work,
When his greatest work is hid from our eyes,
Our virtue not to crush,
Knowing that we are dust,
And not crushing our frame dust to return.
Right frail are we,
And only our Maker knows the right path,
That we may shine with his Glory.

Canst thou not save thyself even?
Perchance thou mayest save another.
Be without fear, and of good cheer:
He saved others, himself he cannot save,
Is but one name of Heaven.
Canst not save thyself?
Travail to save another.
Can God only save in luxury?
Can God only save when we have our way?
Rather, see God his mighty arm outstretched in disaster,
Rather, see glory unfurl in suffering.
Suffering is not what man was made for,
But bitter medicine is better,

And to suffer rightly is lifegiving,
And to suffer unjustly has the Treasure of Heaven inside,
Whilst comfort and ease sees few reach salvation:
Be thou plucked from a wide and broad path?
Set instead on a way strait and narrow?
Give thanks for God savest thee:
Taking from thee what thou desirest,
Giving ever more than thou needest,
That thou mightest ever awaken,
To greater and grander and more wondrous still:
For the gate of Heaven appears narrow, even paltry,
And opens to an expanse vast beyond all imagining,
And the gate of Hell is how we imagine grandeur,
But one finds the belly of the Wyrms constricting ever
tighter.

Now whilst the noose about our necks,
Tightens one and all,
Painful blows of the Creator's chisel stern and severe,
Not in our day, nor for all is it told,
That the Emperor hears the words,
In this sign conquer,
The Church established,
Persecutions come to an end,
And men of valor seeking in monastery and hermitage,
Saving tribulations their souls to keep,
The complaint sounded,
Easy times rob the Church of her saints,
Not in our day does this happen:
For the noose is about our necks,
More than luxury is stripped away;
A Church waxen fat and flabby from easy living,
Must needs be sharpened to a fighting trim,
Chrismated as one returning to Orthodoxy,
Anointed with sacred oil for the athlete,
And myrrh for the bride.
And as Christian is given gifts of royal hue,

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh:
 Gold for kingship,
 Frankincense for divinity,
 Myrrh for anointing the dead,
 A trinity of gifts which are homooousios: one,
 Gold and frankincense which only a fool seeks without
 myrrh,
 Myrrh of pain, suffering, and death,
 Myrrh which befits a sacrifice,
 Myrrh which pours forth gold and frankincense.
 And as the noose tightens about our neck,
 As all but God is taken from us,
 And some would wish to take God himself,
 The chisel will not wield the Creator,
 The arm of providence so deftly hid in easy times,
 Is bared in might in hard times,
 And if those of us who thought we would die in peace,
 Find that suffering and martyrdom are possible,
 We must respond as is meet and right:
 Glory to God in all things!

Be thou ever sober in the silence of thine heart:
 Be mindful of death, and let this mindfulness be sober.
 Wittest thou not the hour of thy death:
 Wete thou well that it be sooner than thou canst know.
 Put thy house in order, each day,
 Peradventure this very night thy soul will be required of
 thee.
 Be thou prepared,
 For the hour cometh like a thief in the night,
 When thou wilt be summoned before Christ's dread
 judgment seat.
 If thou wilt not to drown,
 Say thou not, I can learn to swim tomorrow,
 For the procrastinator's tomorrow never cometh,
 Only todays, to use right or wrong.
 If thou wilt not to drown,

Learn, however imperfectly, to swim today,
 A little better, if thou canst:
 Be thou sober and learn to swim,
 For all of our boats will sink,
 And as we have practiced diligently or neglected the
 summons,
 So will we each sink, or each swim,
 When thy boat is asink, the time for lessons is gone.

For contemplation made were we.
 Unseen warfare exists because contemplation does not.
 Yet each death thou diest well,
 A speck of tarnish besmircheth the mirror no more,
 The garden of tearful supplication ever healeth,
 What was lost in the garden of delights:
 Ever banished our race may be from the garden of delights:
 'Til we find its full stature in vale of tears,
 'Til we find what in death God hath hid,
 'Til each microcosm of death given by day to day,
 Is where we seek Heaven's gate, ever opening wide.

The Lord shepherdeth me even now,
 And nothing shall be wanting:
 There shall be lack of nothing thou shalt need,
 In a place of verdure, a place of rest, where the righteous
 dwell,
 Hath he set my tabernacle today,
 He hath nourished me by the waters of rest,
 Yea, even baptism into Christ's lifegiving death.
 My soul hath he restored from the works of death,
 He hath led me in the paths of righteousness,
 That his name be hallowed.
 Yea though my lifelong walk be through the valley of the
 shadow of death,
 I will fear no evils;
 Thy rod and thy staff themselves have comforted me:
 Thy staff, a shepherd's crook,

A hook of comfort to restore a sheep gone astray,
Thy rod a glaive, a stern mace,
The weapon of an armed Lord and Saviour protecting,
Guarding the flock amidst ravening wolves and lions,
Rod and staff both held by a stern and merciful Lord.
Thou preparest before me table fellowship,
In the midst of all them that afflict me:
Both visible and invisible, external and internal.
Thou hast anointed me with oil,
My head with the oil of gladness,
And thy chalice gives the most excellent cheer.
Thy mercy upon me, a sinner, shall follow me,
All my days of eternal life even on earth,
And my shared dwelling shall be in the house of the Lord,
Unto the greatest of days.

Death may be stronger than mortal men, yet:
Love is stronger than death.

God the Game Changer

Some people wince at terms like *game changer* today the same way they winced in earlier years when they heard, "paradigm shift".

But the terms overuse suggests there might be something that triggered the buzz. When Apple introduced the Macintosh, they changed the scene, not only by causing a few Macintoshes to be sold, but by pushing a permanent shift for mainstream computers to be sold with Macintosh-style Windows, not the older command line MS-DOS. Apple may never have sold the same number of units as Microsoft, and they survived due to a Microsoft bailout, but once Apple introduced the Macintosh, Microsoft considered it non-negotiable to release Windows to compete with the Macintosh environment (even if Vista was a painful enough imitation MacOS to earn the scorn of Microsoft's usual fans). It may be in the end that Apple's biggest gift to the world of desktop computing is Windows: Apple's gift to desktop computing today is that you can now buy, as a mainstream choice, Windows 7 instead of something more like MS-DOS.

It is no longer a provocative statement that Apple's introduction of the iPhone may be a more profound game changer than the Macintosh. It may turn out, in the end, that Apple's gift to mobile computing may be the Droid and

Google-based smartphones—Verizon's "Before you choose a phone, choose a map", and, "iDon't"/"Droid does" marketing campaigns certainly reflect a realization on Verizon's part that shooing Apple away when Apple wanted Verizon to be the iPhone's exclusive carrier was perhaps not Verizon's best decision. But the iPhone changed the game profoundly enough that it was the gold standard everyone was trying to beat, and at least before the Droid, no "iPhone killer" even came close.

In both of these cases, Apple didn't offer their own brand of the existing options: while it was not the first graphical user interface, the Macintosh did not offer an attempt to improve on MS-DOS; it showed what a graphical user interface done right for desktop computing could look like. Likewise, the iPhone did not offer a miniaturized standard desktop environment like Windows Mobile, but it showed what mobile computing done right could look like. While the iPhone may no longer be the only phone that does mobile computing right, the Droid underscores that if you're going to beat Apple now, you need to beat it by the same game as Apple is playing in the iPhone. In neither of these cases did Apple try to beat Microsoft at its own game by providing a better MS-DOS, or a better Windows Mobile. Instead, *they changed the game.*

In our lives, we want God to help us struggle better at the games we are playing. What God wants to do is something different: to change the game.

God the Game Changer at work: A story

Every Lent, Orthodox remember a great saint with a great story. There was a very accomplished priest and monk who was troubled by the idea that no one had gotten as far as him in asceticism (spiritual work). And he was sent to a monastery by the Jordan, where as the custom was, every

Lent monks would go out into the desert. And after a while, he saw a person, and chased this person; after a time he asked for the other person to stop fleeing; the other person called him by name and asked for his cloak, since her clothes were long since gone. He was terrified.

She asked why a great ascetic like him could want to speak with a sinful woman like her. They bowed down and asked each other for a blessing; then she told him that he was a priest and he should bless her, terrifying him even more by knowing that he was a priest. Then they spoke, and the woman called herself a sinner without any single virtue, and asked him to pray. So they began to pray, and a long time the priest looked up and saw her above the ground, levitating. He fell to the ground, weeping in prayer. Then he asked her story.

The woman asked his prayers for her shamelessness; in modern terms, she was a sorority girl who majored in men, money, and margaritas, except worse. Much worse. She went to a religious festival, got to church, and a force kept her from going in. She tried to go around it, then prayed before an icon of Mary the Mother of God asking to be let in and then saying she would do whatever she was told. Then she was able to enter in; she worshipped, and returned to the icon and asked to be told what to do. Then a voice from on high said, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest."

She was given some money and purchased three loaves of bread as she left, and then went, and struggled and struggled and struggled in what seemed like endless temptations and struggles. She had given free reign to her vices for seventeen years, and for seventeen years in the desert she wanted men, wanted wine and lewd songs, wanted meat, and just kept on struggling. After a time—a long, *long* time—things got easier. And she had been living for almost half a century in the desert, eating desert plants and at the mercies of the elements. It came up in the conversation that she quoted from the Bible with

understanding. The monk asked her if she had read them. She said she had never seen another person since making the journey, had no one to read holy books to her, and like most people then, she didn't know how to read. Then she alluded to Scripture and suggested that Christ the Word may teach by himself.

She told him he wouldn't be able to come the next year, but to come the year after and give her communion. The next year illness pinned him down, and the year after he went, then saw her on the other side of the river. She crossed herself and walked over the water. They met again like the first, and she asked him to come again in a year.

He returned in a year to find her dead, kissed her feet and washed them with his tears, and found written next to her her last request and her name, Mary. He didn't see how he would bury her, as per her request, but when he took a piece of wood and began to dig, an enormous lion approached, and at his command dug her grave. Then he and the lion went their separate ways, and per an earlier request, the monk addressed numerous things that needed correction. Somewhere along the way, he asked in perfectly good faith if she would return to the city. Her answer was that no, she would be returning to temptation and ruin all her work. Old woman as she was, she still couldn't handle the temptation of having all those young men around.

What can we learn from all this? In the Parable of the Talents, a master calls his servants and entrusts one with five "talents" (70 pound silver bars), one with two, and one with one talent. He returns and calls an account. The master commends the servant who was given five talents because he has earned five more, and likewise commends the servant given two talents who has earned two more. Then the we hear a different tune (Matthew 25:24-27):

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where

you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest..."

This is a bit of a hard passage. The master represents God quite clearly, and this parable not only has the servant say that his master is (to use different words) cruel, but he harvests where he did not plant seeds and gathers where he has not scattered. Worse than that, the master, i.e. God, seems to endorse the portrayal. What are we to make of this?

One thought is that this is rhetorically abstaining from pressing a point. In other words, we could paraphrase the master's reply, "You wicked and slothful servant! Let's say for the sake of argument that I harvest where I did not plant seeds and gather where I have not scattered. Shouldn't you at least have invested it so I could have it back with interest?"

But in fact a deeper understanding is available, and it hinges on a question. What has God not sown? He created Heaven and earth, all things that can be seen and all things that cannot be seen. The demons themselves were created by God; everything from the highest of the angels to the lowest grain of sand, from the greatest saint to the Devil is a creation of God. What then could there be that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown sin, nor suffering, nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death. He created the Devil, but not the rebellion of angels once created pure. God has not sown this; he has not scattered us out of the glory he intended for us. And he has not planted sin, nor suffering,

nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death, but he harvests them.

The servant's accusation, which the master repeats, is that God is so intent on harvest that he harvests whether or not he has sown. The priest, monk, and *saint* Zosima is among the greatest of saints, and he lived a life of spiritual work and spiritually sober living before God. His life was full of seeds that God sowed, and probably from childhood. And God harvested Saint Zosima's good works. But Saint Zosima needed something. He needed to be knocked completely flat on his back.

But to stop here is to miss the glory of God the Game Changer. The woman in the desert did a great many things that God would never sow. She was a worse sinner than a prostitute. But God harvested her and her sins too, and when Zosima had reached a point where he did not know if there was his equal on earth, God showed Saint Zosima, "*Here is someone who leaves you completely in the dust.*"

Saint Mary wondered how many souls she ensnared. The answer is certainly, "Many," and this is tragic. But God harvested her sins, many as they were, and out of her person, her story, and her intercession God has helped innumerrably more people reach salvation. She is one of the greatest saints the Orthodox Church knows. And something is really destroyed in the story if you omit her numerous sins of sexual self-violation.

And in all this, God changed the game. He did not tear up the fabric of time, but he harvested what was planted in her even more than what was planted in Saint Zosima. God harvests where he has sown, and God the Game Change also harvests where he has never sown. And when he does, he pushes the game to another level entirely.

A present-day example of God's game-changing, this time not with sin but with injury, is in the life of Joni Erickson. At a young age, Erickson dove the wrong way into shallow water and broke her neck, instantly paralyzing her in all four limbs. And she assuredly prayed what everybody

who has such an accident prays if prayer is even considered: "Lord, heal me." And some people are healed, miraculously. But an entirely different, in a way deeper, miracle occurred with her. She adjusted to her loss and is a woman who has not only discovered that her life is still worth living, but has become a vibrant and well-known ambassador for the claim, "Even after a tragedy like mine, *life is still worth living.*" None of this would have happened if she had not suffered an injury that cost her the use of all four limbs. For that matter, none of this would have happened if God answered her prayers by giving her the supernatural healing she wanted. Instead, God changed the game. He answered her prayers, not by giving what she asked for, but by moving the game to the next level. God did not plant her injury, but he has harvested where he did not plant and gathered in where he never scattered.

More than a game change

The Gospel is the story of God changing the game. It was much more than Pharisees who did not recognize Christ; his own disciples seemed to have their eyes equally wide shut.

Christ's people looked for a military Messiah who would deliver the Jews from Roman domination. Christ changed the game; he did not offer salvation as military deliverance, but salvation from sin. He didn't give people what they were looking for; he pushed the game to the next level.

Darkness reigned in the crucifixion of Christ. Something like a quarter to a third of the Gospels are devoted to Christ's passion. The message appears to be very clear: "But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53 NIV). *Game over. All hope is lost.*

Yet this profound evil is precisely what God harvested treasure beyond all beauty. In I Corinthians 15 Saint Paul writes,

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and

this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

And Saint Paul knew a game change in his own life. English translations seem to put this point much more delicately, but Saint Paul, earlier in this chapter, compares himself to a miscarried child, as the least of the Apostles. He almost seems to be saying, "If there's hope for me, there's hope for anybody." And yet God harvested from what was sown in this persecutor of the Church.

The Resurrection is the ultimate game-changing move. Saint John Chrysostom's famous resurrection homily proclaims:

Let no one bewail his poverty,
 For the universal Kingdom has been revealed.
 Let no one weep for his iniquities,
 For pardon has shown forth from the grave.
 Let no one fear death,
 For the Saviour's death has set us free.
 He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it.

By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive.
 He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.
 And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry:
 Hell, said he, was embittered
 When it encountered Thee in the lower regions.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.
 It was embittered, for it was mocked.
 It was embittered, for it was slain.
 It was embittered, for it was overthrown.
 It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.

It took a body, and met God face to face.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took that which was seen, and fell upon the unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!
Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is risen, and life reigns!
Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the grave.
For Christ, being risen from the dead,
Is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen
asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion
Unto ages of ages.

Amen.

We would do well to remember the scene a short distance after the funereal scene of joy turned to weeping at the death of King Caspian in Prince Caspian:

"Look here! I say," he stammered. "It's all very well. But aren't you—? I mean didn't you—"

"Oh, don't be such an ass," said [King] Caspian.

"But," said Eustace, looking at Aslan. "Hasn't he—er—died?"

"Yes," said the Lion in a very quiet voice, almost (Jill thought) as if he were laughing. "He has died. Most people have, you know. Even I have. There are very few who haven't."

Earlier in the Gospel, in Luke chapter 7, there is a scene

where a widow's only son is carried out on a bier, and Christ says something truly strange: before doing anything else, he tells her not to weep. He is speaking to a woman who has been twice bereaved, and with her last bereavement went her source of support. And he tells her, "Weep not!" He then goes on to raise her son from the dead. That isn't what is happening in Christ's resurrection.

Christ, the firstborn of the dead, opened death as one opening the womb. And he himself was sown a natural body and is raised a spiritual body. And God did more than simply flip the switch and make Christ's body like it was before death. The marks of crucifixion remain imprinted on his body as Joni Eareckson Tada remains quadriplegic. But Christ moved forward in triumph. He remains forever imprinted with the marks of death suffered for our sakes, and he bears them as his trophy. His victory as God the Game Changer takes us, harvesting what he has sown in our good deeds and our repentance, and what he has not sown in our sins and in evils that happen to us, and alike transforms us as trophies in his wake. Christ God is victor over both sin and death, and this victory is not just something that could be ours at Judgment Day; it is the central reality of day to day life. Saint Seraphim would greet people with the Paschal greeting year round: "Christ is risen, my joy!" While that is not the usual Orthodox custom, that he did so is entirely fitting and not in any sense an exaggeration of the Resurrection's importance. The Resurrection, the greatest act yet of God the Game Changer, is what God will do on a smaller scale in our lives. God sometimes gives us victory in the game we are playing, and sometimes changes the game and pushes us to the next level. It may be a painful and difficult process; it may involve loss and any amount of bewilderment. But when we seem to have lost, it may just be God the Game Changer's power at work.

Christ is risen, His joy!

A Wonderful Life

Peter never imagined that smashing his thumb in a car door would be the best thing to ever happened to him. But suddenly his plans to move in to the dorm were changed, and he waited a long time at the hospital before finally returning to the dorm and moving in.

Peter arrived for the second time well after check-in time, praying to be able to get in. After a few phone calls, a security officer came in, expressed sympathy about his bandaged thumb, and let him up to his room. The family moved his possessions from the car to his room and made his bed in a few minutes, and by the time it was down, the security guard had called the RA, who brought Peter his keys.

It was the wee hours of the morning when Peter looked at his new home for the second time, and tough as Peter was, the pain in his thumb kept him from falling asleep. He was in as much pain as he'd been in for a while.

He awoke when the light was ebbing, and after some preparations set out, wandering until he found the cafeteria. The pain seemed much when he sat down at a table. (It took him a while to find a seat because the cafeteria was crowded.)

A young man said, "Hi, I'm John." Peter began to extend his hand, then looked at his white bandaged thumb

and said, "Excuse me for not shaking your hand. I am Peter."

A young woman said, "I'm Mary. I saw you earlier and was hoping to see you more."

Peter wondered about something, then said, "I'll drink for that," reached with his right hand, grabbed a glass of soda, and then winced in pain, spilling his drink on the table.

Everybody at the table moved. A couple of people dodged the flow of liquid; others stopped what they were doing, rushing to mop up the spill with napkins. Peter said, "I keep forgetting I need to be careful about my thumb," smiled, grabbed his glass of milk, and slipped again, spilling milk all over his food.

Peter stopped, sat back, and then laughed for a while. "This is an interesting beginning to my college education."

Mary said, "I noticed you managed to smash your thumb in a car door without saying any words you regret. What else has happened?"

Peter said, "Nothing great; I had to go to the ER, where I had to wait, before they could do something about my throbbing thumb. I got back at 4:00 AM and couldn't get to sleep for a long time because I was in so much pain. Then I overslept my alarm and woke up naturally in time for dinner. How about you?"

Mary thought for a second about the people she met. Peter could see the sympathy on her face.

John said, "Wow. That's nasty."

Peter said, "I wish we couldn't feel pain. Have you thought about how nice it would be to live without pain?"

Mary said, "I'd like that."

John said, "Um..."

Mary said, "What?"

John said, "Actually, there are people who don't feel pain, and there's a name for the condition. You've heard of it."

Peter said, "I haven't heard of that before."

John said, "Yes you have. It's called leprosy."

Peter said, "What do you mean by 'leprosy'? I thought leprosy was a disease that ravaged the body."

John said, "It is. But that is only because it destroys the ability to feel pain. The way it works is very simple. We all get little nicks and scratches, and because they hurt, we show extra sensitivity. Our feet start to hurt after a long walk, so without even thinking about it we... shift things a little, and keep anything really bad from happening. That pain you are feeling is your body's way of asking room to heal so that the smashed thumbnail (or whatever it is) that hurts so terribly now won't leave you permanently maimed. Back to feet, a leprosy patient will walk exactly the same way and get wounds we'd never even think of for taking a long walk. All the terrible injuries that make leprosy a feared disease happen *only* because leprosy keeps people from feeling pain."

Peter looked at his thumb, and his stomach growled.

John said, "I'm full. Let me get a drink for you, and then I'll help you drink it."

Mary said, "And I'll get you some dry food. We've already eaten; it must—"

Peter said, "Please, I've survived much worse. It's just a bit of pain."

John picked up a clump of wet napkins and threatened to throw it at Peter before standing up and walking to get something to drink. Mary followed him.

Peter sat back and just laughed.

John said, "We have some time free after dinner; let's just wander around campus."

They left the glass roofed building and began walking around, enjoying the grass and the scenery.

After some wandering, Peter and those he had just met looked at the castle-like Blanchard Hall, each one transported in his imagination to be in a more ancient era, and walked around the campus, looked at a fountain, listened to some music, and looked at a display of a giant

mastodon which had died before the end of the last ice age, and whose bones had been unearthed in a nearby excavation. They got lost, but this was not a terrible concern; they were taking in the campus.

Their slow walk was interrupted when John looked at his watch and realized it was time for the "floor fellowship" and orientation games.

Between orientation games, Peter heard bits of conversation: "This has been a bummer; I've gotten two papercuts this week." "—and then I—" "What instruments do you—" "I'm from France too! *Tu viens de Paris?*" "Really? You—" Everybody seemed to be chattering, and Peter wished he could be in one of—actually, several of those conversations at once.

Paul's voice cut in and said, "For this next activity we are going to form a human circle. With your team, stand in a circle, and everybody reach in and grab another hand with each hand. Then hold on tight; when I say, "Go," you want to untangle yourselves, without letting go. The first team to untangle themselves wins!"

Peter reached in, and found each of his hands clasped in a solid, masculine grip. Then the race began, and people jostled and tried to untangle themselves. This was a laborious process and, one by one, every other group freed itself, while Peter's group seemed stuck on—someone called and said, "I think we're knotted!" As people began to thin out, Paul looked with astonishment and saw that they were indeed knotted. "A special prize to them, too, for managing the best tangle!"

"And now, we'll have a three-legged race! Gather into pairs, and each two of you take a burlap sack. Then—" Paul continued, and with every game, the talk seemed to flow more. When the finale finished, Peter found himself again with John and Mary and heard the conversations flowing around him: "Really? You too?" "But you don't understand. Hicks have a slower pace of life; we enjoy things without all the things you city dwellers need for entertainment. And we

learn resourceful ways to—" "—and only at Wheaton would the administration *forbid* dancing while *requiring* the games we just played and—" Then Peter lost himself in a conversation that continued long into the night. He expected to be up at night thinking about all the beloved people he left at home, but Peter was too busy thinking about John's and Mary's stories.

The next day Peter woke up his to the hideous sound of his alarm clock, and groggily trudged to the dining hall for coffee, and searched for his advisor.

Peter found the appropriate hallway, wandered around nervously until he found a door with a yellowed plaque that said "Julian Johnson," knocked once, and pushed the door open. A white-haired man said, "Peter Jones? How are you? Do come in... What can I do for you?"

Peter pulled out a sheet of paper, looked down at it for a moment and said, "I'm sorry I'm late. I need you to write what courses I should take and sign here. Then I can be out of your way."

The old man sat back, drew a deep breath, and relaxed into a fatherly smile. Peter began to wonder if his advisor was going to say anything at all. Then Prof. Johnson motioned towards an armchair, as rich and luxurious as his own, and then looked as if he remembered something and offered a bowl full of candy. "Sit down, sit down, and make yourself comfortable. May I interest you in candy?" He picked up an engraved metal bowl and held it out while Peter grabbed a few Lifesavers.

Prof. Johnson sat back, silent for a moment, and said, "I'm sorry I'm out of butterscotch; that always seems to disappear. Please sit down, and tell me about yourself. We can get to that form in a minute. One of the priveleges of this job is that I get to meet interesting people. Now, where are you from?"

Peter said, "I'm afraid there's not much that's interesting about me. I'm from a small town downstate that doesn't have anything to distinguish itself. My amusements

have been reading, watching the cycle of the year, oh, and running. Not much interesting in that. Now which classes should I take?"

Prof. Johnson sat back and smiled, and Peter became a little less tense. "You run?"

Peter said, "Yes; I was hoping to run on the track this afternoon, after the lecture. I've always wanted to run on a real track."

The old man said, "You know, I used to run myself, before I became an official Old Geezer and my orthopaedist told me my knees couldn't take it. So I have to content myself with swimming now, which I've grown to love. Do you know about the Prairie Path?"

Peter said, "No, what's that?"

Prof. Johnson said, "Years ago, when I ran, I ran through the areas surrounding the College—there are a lot of beautiful houses. And, just south of the train tracks with the train you can hear now, there's a path before you even hit the street. You can run, or bike, or walk, on a path covered with fine white gravel, with trees and prairie plants on either side. It's a lovely view." He paused, and said, "Any ideas what you want to do after Wheaton?"

Peter said, "No. I don't even know what I want to major in."

Prof. Johnson said, "A lot of students don't know what they want to do. Are you familiar with Career Services? They can help you get an idea of what kinds of things you like to do."

Peter looked at his watch and said, "It's chapel time."

Prof. Johnson said, "Relax. I can write you a note."

Peter began to relax again, and Prof. Johnson continued, "Now you like to read. What do you like to read?"

Peter said, "Newspapers and magazines, and I read this really cool book called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Oh, and I like the Bible."

Prof. Johnson said, "I do too. What do you like about it most?"

"I like the stories in the Old Testament."

"One general tip: here at Wheaton, we have different kinds of professors—"

Peter said, "Which ones are best?"

Prof. Johnson said, "Different professors are best for different students. Throughout your tenure at Wheaton, ask your friends and learn which professors have teaching styles that you learn well with and mesh well with. Consider taking other courses from a professor you like. Now we have a lot of courses which we think expose you to new things and stretch you—people come back and see that these courses are best. Do you like science?"

"I like it; I especially liked a physics lab."

Prof. Johnson began to flip through the course catalogue. "Have you had calculus?" Prof. Johnson's mind wandered over the differences between from the grand, Utopian vision for "calculus" as it was first imagined and how different a conception it had from anything that would be considered "mathematics" today. Or should he go into that? He wavered, and then realized Peter had answered his question. "Ok," Prof. Johnson said, "the lab physics class unfortunately requires that you've had calculus. Would you like to take calculus now? Have you had geometry, algebra, and trigonometry?"

Peter said, "Yes, I did, but I'd like a little break from that now. Maybe I could take calculus next semester."

"Fair enough. You said you liked to read."

"Magazines and newspapers."

"Those things deal with the unfolding human story. I wonder if you'd like to take world civilization now, or a political science course."

"History, but why study world history? Why can't I just study U.S. history?"

Prof. Johnson said, "The story of our country is intertwined with that of our world. I think you might find that some of the things in world history are a lot closer to home than you think—and we have some real storytellers in

our history department."

"That sounds interesting. What else?"

"The Theology of Culture class is one many students find enjoyable, and it helps build a foundation for Old and New Testament courses. Would you be interested in taking it for A quad or B quad, the first or second half of the semester?"

"Could I do both?"

"I wish I could say yes, but this course only lasts half the semester. The other half you could take Foundations of Wellness—you could do running as homework!"

"I think I'll do that first, and then Theology of Culture. That should be new," Peter said, oblivious to how tightly connected he was to theology and culture. "What else?"

Prof. Johnson said, "We have classes where people read things that a lot of people have found really interesting. Well, that could describe several classes, but I was thinking about Classics of Western Literature or Literature of the Modern World."

Peter said, "Um... Does Classics of Western Literature cover ancient and medieval literature, and Literature of the Modern World cover literature that isn't Western? Because if they do, I'm not sure I could connect with it."

Prof. Johnson relaxed into his seat. "You know, a lot of people think that. But you know what?"

Peter said, "What?"

"There is something human that crosses cultures. That is why the stories have been selected. Stories written long ago, and stories written far away, can have a lot to connect with."

"Ok. How many more courses should I take?"

"You're at 11 credits now; you probably want 15. Now you said that you like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I'm wondering if you would also like a philosophy course."

Peter said, "*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* is... I don't suppose there are any classes that

use that. Or are there? I've heard Pirsig isn't given his fair due by philosophers."

Prof. Johnson said, "If you approach one of our philosophy courses the way you approach *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, I think you'll profit from the encounter. I wonder if our Issues and Worldviews in Philosophy might interest you. I'm a big fan of thinking worldviewishly, and our philosophers have some pretty interesting things to say."

Peter asked, "What does 'worldviewishly' mean?"

Prof. Johnson searched for an appropriate simplification. "It means thinking in terms of worldviews. A worldview is the basic philosophical framework that gives shape to how we view the world. Our philosophers will be able to help you understand the basic issues surrounding worldviews and craft your own Christian worldview. You may find this frees you from the Enlightenment's secularizing influence—and if you don't know what the Enlightenment is now, you will learn to understand it, and its problems, and how you can be somewhat freer of its chain."

Peter said, "Ok. Well, I'll take those classes. It was good to meet you."

Prof. Johnson looked at the class schedule and helped Peter choose class sections, then said, "I enjoyed talking with you. Please do take some more candy—put a handful in your pocket or something. I just want to make one more closing comment. I want to see you succeed. Wheaton wants to see you succeed. There are some rough points and problems along the way, and if you bring them to me I can work with them and try to help you. If you want to talk with your RA or our chaplain or someone else, that's fine, but please... my door is *always* open. And it was good to meet you too! Goodbye!"

Peter walked out, completely relaxed, and was soon to be energized in a scavenger hunt searching for things from a dog biscuit to a car bumper to a burning sheet of paper not

lit by someone in his group, before again relaxing into the "brother-sister floor fellowship" which combined mediocre "7-11 praise songs" (so called because they have "7 words, repeated 11 times") with the light of another world shining through.

It was not long before the opening activities wound down and Peter began to settle into a regular routine.

Peter and Mary both loved to run, but for different reasons. Peter was training himself for various races; he had not joined track, as he did in high school, but there were other races. Mary ran to feel the sun and wind and rain. And, without any conscious effort, they found themselves running together down the prairie path together, and Peter clumsily learning to match his speed to hers. And, as time passed, they talked, and talked, and talked, and talked, and their runs grew longer.

When the fall break came, they both joined a group going to the northwoods of Wisconsin for a program that was half-work and half-play. And each one wrote a letter home about the other. Then Peter began his theology of culture class, and said, "This is what I want to study." Mary did not have a favorite class, at least not that she realized, until Peter asked her what her favorite class was and she said, "Literature."

When Christmas came, they went to their respective homes and spent the break thinking about each other, and they talked about this when they returned. They ended the conversation, or at least they thought they did, and then each hurried back to catch the other and say one more thing, and then the conversation turned out to last much longer, and ended with a kiss.

Valentine's Day was syrupy. It was trite enough that their more romantically inclined friends groaned, but it did not seem at all trite or syrupy to them. As Peter's last name was Patrick, he called Mary's father and prayed that St. Patrick's Day would be a momentous day for both of them.

Peter and Mary took a slow run to a nearby village, and

had dinner at an Irish pub. Amidst the din, they had some hearty laughs. The waitress asked Mary, "Is there anything else that would make this night memorable?" Then Mary saw Peter on his knee, opening a jewelry box with a ring: "I love you, Mary. Will you marry me?"

Mary cried for a good five minutes before she could answer. And when she had answered, they sat in silence, a silence that overpowered the din. Then Mary wiped her eyes and they went outside.

It was cool outside, and the moon was shining brightly. Peter pulled a camera from his pocket, and said, "Stay where you are. Let me back up a bit. And hold your hand up. You look even more beautiful with that ring on your finger."

Peter's camera flashed as he took a picture, just as a drunk driver slammed into Mary. The sedan spun into a storefront, and Mary flew up into the air, landed, and broke a beer bottle with her face.

People began to come out, and in a few minutes the police and paramedics arrived. Peter somehow managed to answer the police officers' questions and to begin kicking himself for being too stunned to act.

When Peter left his room the next day, he looked for Prof. Johnson. Prof. Johnson asked, "May I give you a hug?" and then sat there, simply being with Peter in his pain. When Peter left, Prof. Johnson said, "I'm not just here for academics. I'm here for you." Peter went to chapel and his classes, feeling a burning rage that almost nothing could pierce. He kept going to the hospital, and watching Mary with casts on both legs and one arm, and many tiny stitches on her face, fluttering on the borders of consciousness. One time Prof. Johnson came to visit, and he said, "I can't finish my classes." Prof. Johnson looked at him and said, "The college will give you a full refund." Peter said, "Do you know of any way I can stay here to be with Mary?" Prof. Johnson said, "You can stay with me. And I believe a position with UPS would let you get some income, doing something

physical. The position is open for you." Prof. Johnson didn't mention the calls he'd made, and Peter didn't think about them. He simply said, "Thank you."

A few days later, Mary began to be weakly conscious. Peter finally asked a nurse, "Why are there so many stitches on her face? Was she cut even more badly than—"

The nurse said, "There are a lot of stitches very close together because the emergency room had a cosmetic surgeon on duty. There will still be a permanent mark on her face, but some of the wound will heal without a scar."

Mary moved the left half of her mouth in half a smile. Peter said, "That was a kind of cute smile. How come she can smile like that?"

The nurse said, "One of the pieces of broken glass cut a nerve. It is unlikely she'll ever be able to move part of her face again."

Peter looked and touched Mary's hand. "I still think it's really quite cute."

Mary looked at him, and then passed out.

Peter spent a long couple of days training and attending to practical details. Then he came back to Mary.

Mary looked at Peter, and said, "It's a Monday. Don't you have classes now?"

Peter said, "No."

Mary said, "Why not?"

Peter said, "I want to be here with you."

Mary said, "I talked with one of the nurses, and she said that you dropped out of school so you could be with me.

"Is that true?" she said.

Peter said, "I hadn't really thought about it that way."

Mary closed her eyes, and when Peter started to leave because he decided she wanted to be left alone, she said, "Stop. Come here."

Peter came to her bedside and knelt.

Mary said, "Take this ring off my finger."

Peter said, "Is it hurting you?"

Mary said, "No, and it is the greatest treasure I own."

Take it off and take it back."

Peter looked at her, bewildered. "Do you not want to marry me?"

Mary said, "This may sting me less because I don't remember our engagement. I don't remember anything that happened near that time; I have only the stories others, even the nurses, tell me about a man who loves me very much."

Peter said, "But don't you love me?"

Mary forced back tears. "Yes, I love you, yes, I love you. And I know that you love me. You are young and strong, and have the love to make a happy marriage. You'll make some woman a very good husband. I thought that woman would be me.

"But I can see what you will not. You said I was beautiful, and I was. Do you know what my prognosis is? I will probably be able to stand. At least for short periods of time. If I'm fortunate, I may walk. With a walker. I will never be able to run again—Peter, I am nobody, and I have no future. Absolutely nobody. You are young and strong. Go and find a woman who is worth your love."

Mary and Peter both cried for a long time. Then Peter walked out, and paused in the doorway, crying. He felt torn inside, and then went in to say a couple of things to Mary. He said, "I believe in miracles."

Then Mary cried, and Peter said something else I'm not going to repeat. Mary said something. Then another conversation began.

The conversation ended with Mary saying, "You're stupid, Peter. You're really, really stupid. I love you. I don't deserve such love. You're making a mistake. I love you." Then Peter went to kiss Mary, and as he bent down, he bent his mouth to meet the lips that he still saw as "really quite cute."

The stress did not stop. The physical therapists, after time, wondered that Mary had so much fight in her. But it stressed her, and Peter did his job without liking it. Mary

and Peter quarreled and made up and quarreled and made up. Peter prayed for a miracle when they made up and sometimes when they quarreled. Were this not enough stress, there was an agonizingly long trial—and knowing that the drunk driver was behind bars didn't make things better. But Mary very slowly learned to walk again. After six months, if Peter helped her, she could walk 100 yards before the pain became too great to continue.

Peter hadn't been noticing that the stress diminished, but he did become aware of something he couldn't put his finger on. After a night of struggling, he got up, went to church, and was floored by the Bible reading of, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." and the idea that when you do or do not visit someone in prison, you are visiting or refusing to visit Christ. Peter absently went home, tried to think about other things, made several phone calls, and then forced himself to drive to one and only one prison.

He stopped in the parking lot, almost threw up, and then steeled himself to go inside. He found a man, Jacob, and... Jacob didn't know who Peter was, but he recognized him as looking familiar. It was an awkward meeting. Then he recognized him as the man whose now wife he had crippled. When Peter left, he vomited and felt like a failure. He talked about it with Mary...

That was the beginning of a friendship. Peter chose to love the man in prison, even if there was no pleasure in it. And that created something deeper than pleasure, something Peter couldn't explain.

As Peter and Mary were planning the wedding, Mary said, "I want to enter with Peter next to me, no matter what the tradition says. It will be a miracle if I have the strength to stand for the whole wedding, and if I have to lean on someone I want it to be Peter. And I don't want to sit on a chair; I would rather spend my wedding night wracked by pain than go through my wedding supported by something

lifeless!"

When the rehearsal came, Mary stood, and the others winced at the pain in her face. And she stood, and walked, for the entire rehearsal without touching Peter once. Then she said, "I can do it. I can go through the wedding on my own strength," and collapsed in pain.

At the wedding, she stood next to Peter, walking, her face so radiant with joy that some of the guests did not guess she was in exquisite pain. They walked next to each other, not touching, and Mary slowed down and stopped in the center of the church. Peter looked at her, wondering what Mary was doing.

Then Mary's arm shot around Peter's neck, and Peter stood startled for a moment before he placed his arm around her, squeezed her tightly, and they walked together to the altar.

On the honeymoon, Mary told Peter, "You are the only person I need." This was the greatest bliss either of them had known, and the honeymoon's glow shined and shined.

Peter and Mary agreed to move somewhere less expensive to settle down, and were too absorbed in their wedded bliss and each other to remember promises they had made earlier, promises to seek a church community for support and friends. And Peter continued working at an unglamorous job, and Mary continued fighting to walk and considered the housework she was capable of doing a badge of honor, and neither of them noticed that the words, "I love you" were spoken ever so slightly less frequently, nor did they the venom and ice creeping into their words.

One night they exploded. What they fought about was not important. What was important was that Peter left, burning with rage. He drove, and drove, until he reached Wheaton, and at daybreak knocked on Prof. Johnson's door. There was anger in his voice when he asked, "Are you still my friend?"

Prof. Johnson got him something to eat and stayed with him when he fumed with rage, and said, "I don't care if I'm

supposed to be with her, I can't go back!" Then Prof. Johnson said, "Will you make an agreement with me? I promise you I won't ever tell you to go back to her, or accept her, or accept what she does, or apologize to her, or forgive her, or in any way be reconciled. But I need you to trust me that I love you and will help you decide what is best to do."

Peter said, "Yes."

Prof. Johnson said, "Then stay with me. You need some rest. Take the day to rest. There's food in the fridge, and I have books and a nice back yard. There's iced tea in the—excuse me, there's Coke and 7 Up in the boxes next to the fridge. When I can come back, we can talk."

Peter relaxed, and he felt better. He told Prof. Johnson. Prof. Johnson said, "That's excellent. What I'd like you to do next is go in to work, with a lawyer I know. You can tell him what's going on, and he'll lead you to a courtroom to observe."

Peter went away to court the next day, and when he came back he was ashen. He said nothing to Prof. Johnson.

Then, after the next day, he came back looking even more disturbed. "The first day, the lawyer, George, took me into divorce court. I thought I saw the worst that divorce court could get. Until I came back today. It was the same—this sickening scene where two people had become the most bitter enemies. I hope it doesn't come to this. This was atrocious. It was vile. It was more than vile. It was—"

Prof. Johnson sent him back for a third day. This time Peter said nothing besides, "I think I've been making a mistake."

After the fourth day, Peter said, "Help me! I've been making the biggest mistake of my *life!*"

After a full week had passed, Peter said, "*Please, I beg you, don't send me back there.*"

Prof. Johnson sent Peter back to watch a divorce court for one more miserable, excruciating day. Then he said, "Now you can do whatever you want. What do you want to do?"

The conflict between Peter and Mary ended the next day.

Peter went home, begging Mary for forgiveness, and no sooner than he had begun his apology, a thousand things were reflected in Mary's face and she begged his forgiveness. Then they talked, and debated whether to go back to Wheaton, or stay where they were. Finally Mary said, "I really want to go back to Wheaton."

Peter began to shyly approach old friends. He later misquoted: "I came crawling with a thimble in the desperate hope that they'd give a few tiny drops of friendship and love. Had I known how they would respond, I would have come running with a bucket!"

Peter and Mary lived together for many years; they had many children and were supported by many friends.

The years passed and Peter and Mary grew into a blissfully happy marriage. Mary came to have increasing health problems as a result of the accident, and those around them were amazed at how their love had transformed the suffering the accident created in both of their lives. At least those who knew them best saw the transformation. There were many others who could only see their happiness as a mirage.

As the years passed, Jacob grew to be a good friend. And when Peter began to be concerned that his wife might be... Jacob had also grown wealthy, very wealthy, and assembled a top-flight legal team (without taking a dime of Peter's money—over Peter's protests, of course), to prevent what the doctors would normally do in such a case, given recent shifts in the medical system.

And then Mary's health grew worse, much worse, and her suffering grew worse with it, and pain medications seemed to be having less and less effect. Those who didn't know Mary were astonished that someone in so much pain could enjoy life so much, nor the hours they spent gazing into each other's eyes, holding hands, when Mary's pain seemed to vanish. A second medical opinion, and a third,

and a fourth, confirmed that Mary had little chance of recovery even to her more recent state. And whatever measures been taken, whatever testimony Peter and Mary could give about the joy of their lives, the court's decision still came:

The court wishes to briefly review the facts of the case. Subject is suffering increasingly severe effects from an injury that curtailed her life greatly as a young person. from which she has never recovered, and is causing increasingly complications now that she will never again have youth's ability to heal. No fewer than four medical opinions admitted as expert testimony substantially agree that subject is in extraordinary and excruciating pain; that said excruciating pain is increasing; that said excruciating pain is increasingly unresponsive to medication; that subject has fully lost autonomy and is dependent on her husband; that this dependence is profound, without choice, and causes her husband to be dependent without choice on others and exercise little autonomy; and the prognosis is only of progressively worse deterioration and increase in pain, with no question of recovery.

The court finds it entirely understandable that the subject, who has gone through such trauma, and is suffering increasingly severe complications, would be in a state of some denial. Although a number of positions could be taken, the court also finds it understandable that a husband would try to maintain a hold on what cannot exist, and needlessly prolong his wife's suffering. It is not, however, the court's position to judge whether this is selfish...

For all the impressive-sounding arguments that have been mounted, the court cannot accord a traumatized patient or her ostensibly well-meaning husband a privilege that the court itself does not claim. The court does not find that it has an interest in

allowing this woman to continue in her severe and worsening state of suffering.

Peter was at her side, holding her hand and looking into his wife's eyes, The hospital doctor had come. Then Peter said, "I love you," and Mary said, "I love you," and they kissed.

Mary's kiss was still burning on Peter's lips when two nurses hooked Mary up to an IV and injected her with 5000 milligrams of sodium thiopental, then a saline flush followed by 100 milligrams of pancurium bromide, then a saline flush and 20 milligrams of potassium chloride.

A year later to the day, Peter died of a broken heart.

God the Spiritual Father

I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty...

The Nicene Creed

All of us do the will of God. The question is not whether we do God's will or not, but whether we do God's will as *instruments*, as Satan and Judas did, or as *sons*, as Peter and John did. In the end Satan may be nothing more than a hammer in the hand of God.

C.S. Lewis, paraphrased

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs

My precious, precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you see one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

“Footprints,” paraphrased

Look to every situation as if you were going to

bargain at the market, always looking to make a spiritual profit.

The Philokalia, paraphrased

For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make Christ the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Hebrews

There are a lot of concerns on people's minds. For those of us in the U.S., we've been facing an economic disaster. Is "the decade from Hell" over and done? Or has the economic depression just begun? Has the *real* nightmare just *begun*? People have faced unemployment, and some are worried about hyper-inflation. And the big question on almost everyone's mind is, "Can I survive this? And if so, how?" And these quotes have something to say to the billion dollar question on almost everyone's mind.

Let's turn the clock back a bit, to 1755. There was a catastrophic earthquake in Lisbonne in Portugal, and its untold misery shook people's faith in the goodness of the world we live in. In the questioning that came afterwards, Voltaire wrote *Candide* in which the rather ludicrous teacher Pangloss is always explaining that we live in "the best of all possible worlds:" no matter what misfortune or disaster befell them, the unshakable Pangloss would always find a way to explain that we still lived in the best of all possible worlds. And Voltaire's point is to rip that preposterous idea apart, giving a dose of reality and showing what the misery in Lisbonne made painfully clear: we do *not* live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But there is another shoe to drop.

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Far

from it. But we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods, and it is a more profound truth, a more vibrant truth, a truth that goes much deeper into the heart of root of all things to say that we may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but *we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods*.

Once we have truly grasped that God the Spiritual Father is the best of all possible Gods, it becomes a mistake to focus on how, in fact, we simply do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Perhaps we all need to repent and recognize that we ourselves are far from being the best of all possible *people*. But we need to raise our eyes higher: raise our eyes and see that our lives and our world are under the love of the best of all possible Gods: God the Spiritual Father.

The Orthodox Church has understood this since ancient times. Let's read some longer quotes:

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more

readily attain salvation of soul.

- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.
- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

The Philokalia

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it

becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The Philokalia

All These Things Were From Me

(The new St. Seraphim, of Viritsa was born in 1866. He married and had three children. In 1920, at the age of 54, he and his wife quietly separated and each entered monastic life. Eventually he became the spiritual father of the St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, where, as a clairvoyant staretz, he also confessed thousands of laity. He said, "I am the storage room where people's afflictions gather." In

imitation of his patron saint, he prayed for a thousand nights on a rock before an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov. He reposed in the Lord in 1949 and the Church of Russia glorified him in August of 2000.)

The following is (slightly abridged) from a letter sent by St. Seraphim to a spiritual child of his, a hierarch who was at that time in a Soviet prison. It is in the form of consolation given by God to a troubled man's soul.

Have you ever thought that everything that concerns you, concerns Me, also? You are precious in my eyes and I love you; for his reason, it is a special joy for Me to train you. When temptations and the opponent [the Evil One] come upon you like a river, I want you to know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that your weakness has need of My strength, and your safety lies in allowing Me to protect you. I want you to know that when you are in difficult conditions, among people who do not understand you, and cast you away, This was from Me.

I am your God, the circumstances of your life are in My hands; you did not end up in your position by chance; this is precisely the position I have appointed for you. Weren't you asking Me to teach you humility? And there - I placed you precisely in the "school" where they teach this lesson. Your environment, and those who are around you, are performing My will. Do you have financial difficulties and can just barely survive? Know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that I dispose of your money, so take refuge in Me and depend upon Me. I want you to know that My storehouses are inexhaustible, and I am faithful in My promises. Let it never happen that they tell you in your need, "Do not believe in your Lord and God." Have you ever spent the night in suffering? Are you separated from your relatives, from those you

love? I allowed this that you would turn to Me, and in Me find consolation and comfort. Did your friend or someone to whom you opened your heart, deceive you? This was from Me.

I allowed this frustration to touch you so that you would learn that your best friend is the Lord. I want you to bring everything to Me and tell Me everything. Did someone slander you? Leave it to Me; be attached to Me so that you can hide from the "contradiction of the nations." I will make your righteousness shine like light and your life like midday noon. Your plans were destroyed? Your soul yielded and you are exhausted? This was from Me.

You made plans and have your own goals; you brought them to Me to bless them. But I want you to leave it all to Me, to direct and guide the circumstances of your life by My hand, because you are the orphan, not the protagonist. Unexpected failures found you and despair overcame your heart, but know That this was from Me.

With tiredness and anxiety I am testing how strong your faith is in My promises and your boldness in prayer for your relatives. Why is it not you who entrusted their cares to My providential love? You must leave them to the protection of My All Pure Mother. Serious illness found you, which may be healed or may be incurable, and has nailed you to your bed. This was from Me.

Because I want you to know Me more deeply, through physical ailment, do not murmur against this trial I have sent you. And do not try to understand My plans for the salvation of people's souls, but uncomplainingly and humbly bow your head before My goodness. You were dreaming about doing something special for Me and, instead of doing it, you fell into a bed of pain. This was from Me.

Because then you were sunk in your own works

and plans and I wouldn't have been able to draw your thoughts to Me. But I want to teach you the most deep thoughts and My lessons, so that you may serve Me. I want to teach you that you are nothing without Me. Some of my best children are those who, cut off from an active life, learn to use the weapon of ceaseless prayer. You were called unexpectedly to undertake a difficult and responsible position, supported by Me. I have given you these difficulties and as the Lord God I will bless all your works, in all your paths. In everything I, your Lord, will be your guide and teacher. Remember always that every difficulty you come across, every offensive word, every slander and criticism, every obstacle to your works, which could cause frustration and disappointment, This is from Me.

Know and remember always, no matter where you are, That whatsoever hurts will be dulled as soon as you learn In all things, to look at Me. Everything has been sent to you by Me, for the perfection of your soul.

All these things were from Me.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the

creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy

sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans

We may be entering an economic depression. We live in hard times, and things may get much harder. It is becoming more and more clear that this is no mere recession: it looks more and more like a depression. We see people asking, "Where is God when it hurts?" And there is something important about the answer to "Where is God when it hurts?": something very important, something profoundly important.

I believe in one God, the *Spiritual* Father Almighty.

I'm not sure how to explain this without saying something about Orthodox monasticism, but the Orthodox concept of a *spiritual father* is of someone one owes obedience in everything, and who normally assigns some things that are very difficult to do, unpleasant, and painful. And this seems a strange thing to be getting into. But there is method to what may seem mad: we do not reach our greatest good, we do not flourish, we do not reach our highest heights, if we are the spiritual equivalent of spoiled children. And the entire point of this duty of obedience is to arrange things for the good of the person who obeys in this situation. *The entire point of obedience in what the spiritual father arranges is for the spiritual father as a spiritual physician to give health and freedom through the disciple's obedience.*

In that sense, only monks and nuns are expected to have spiritual fathers to shape them. The rest of us have

God as our Spiritual Father, and we can kick against the goads, but God the Spiritual Father is at work in every person we meet. *God the Spiritual Father is God the Great Physician, working everything for our health and freedom if we will cooperate.* People and situations he sends us may be part of his will for us as instruments, or they may be part of his will for us as sons of God, but God's will unfolds in each person who acts in our lives: kind people and cruel, having excess and having lack, getting our way and having our will cut short as a spiritual father does to form a monk under his care, becomes part of the work of God the Spiritual Father. Even economic nightmares become part of "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

When God gives us our true good, *nothing* can take it away.

What exactly is our true good unfolds in the saints' lives, which are well worth reading: many of them lived in great hardship. Some were martyred; the beloved St. Nectarios lost his job repeatedly for reasons that were not just unfortunate, but completely and absolutely unfair. God was still at work in his life, and he is now crowned as a saint in Heaven. God allowed things to happen, terrible things to happen, but not one of them took him away from God giving him everything he needed and ultimately working in him the glory of one of the greatest saints in recent times.

The Sermon on the Mount says some harsh words about how we use money, but these words set the stage for a profound treasure that we can still have, even in an economic depression:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, [*or, today, where economic havoc can ruin our financial planning*] but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in

and steal [*or, today, where your treasures cannot be taken away even by a complete economic meltdown*].

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the godless seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The life of St. Philaret the Merciful speaks volumes:

Righteous Philaret the Merciful, son of George and

Anna, was raised in piety and the fear of God. He lived during the eighth century in the village of Amneia in the Paphlagonian district of Asia Minor. His wife, Theoseba, was from a rich and illustrious family, and they had three children: a son John, and daughters Hypatia and Evanthia.

Philaret was a rich and illustrious dignitary, but he did not hoard his wealth. Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about "these least ones" (Mt. 25:40); the the Apostle Paul's reminder that we will take nothing with us from this world (1 Tim 6:7); and the assertion of King David that the righteous would not be forsaken (Ps 36/37:25). Philaret, whose name means "lover of virtue," was famed for his love for the poor.

One day Ishmaelites [Arabs] attacked Paphlagonia, devastating the land and plundering the estate of Philaret. There remained only two oxen, a donkey, a cow with her calf, some beehives, and the house. But he also shared them with the poor. His wife reproached him for being heartless and unconcerned for his own family. Mildly, yet firmly he endured the reproaches of his wife and the jeers of his children. "I have hidden away riches and treasure," he told his family, "so much that it would be enough for you to feed and clothe yourselves, even if you lived a hundred years without working."

The saint's gifts always brought good to the recipient. Whoever received anything from him found that the gift would multiply, and that person would become rich. Knowing this, a certain man came to St Philaret asking for a calf so that he could start a herd. The cow missed its calf and began to bellow. Theoseba said to her husband, "You have no pity on us, you merciless man, but don't you feel sorry for the cow? You have separated her from her calf." The saint

praised his wife, and agreed that it was not right to separate the cow and the calf. Therefore, he called the poor man to whom he had given the calf and told him to take the cow as well.

That year there was a famine, so St Philaret took the donkey and went to borrow six bushels of wheat from a friend of his. When he returned home, a poor man asked him for a little wheat, so he told his wife to give the man a bushel. Theoseba said, "First you must give a bushel to each of us in the family, then you can give away the rest as you choose." Philaretos then gave the man two bushels of wheat. Theoseba said sarcastically, "Give him half the load so you can share it." The saint measured out a third bushel and gave it to the man. Then Theoseba said, "Why don't you give him the bag, too, so he can carry it?" He gave him the bag. The exasperated wife said, "Just to spite me, why not give him all the wheat." St Philaret did so.

Now the man was unable to lift the six bushels of wheat, so Theoseba told her husband to give him the donkey so he could carry the wheat home. Blessing his wife, Philaret gave the donkey to the man, who went home rejoicing. Theoseba and the children wept because they were hungry.

The Lord rewarded Philaret for his generosity: when the last measure of wheat was given away, a old friend sent him forty bushels. Theoseba kept most of the wheat for herself and the children, and the saint gave away his share to the poor and had nothing left. When his wife and children were eating, he would go to them and they gave him some food. Theoseba grumbled saying, "How long are you going to keep that treasure of yours hidden? Take it out so we can buy food with it."

During this time the Byzantine empress Irene (797-802) was seeking a bride for her son, the future emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (780-797).

Therefore, emissaries were sent throughout all the Empire to find a suitable girl, and the envoys came to Amneia.

When Philaret and Theoseba learned that these most illustrious guests were to visit their house, Philaret was very happy, but Theoseba was sad, for they did not have enough food. But Philaret told his wife to light the fire and to decorate their home. Their neighbors, knowing that imperial envoys were expected, brought everything required for a rich feast.

The envoys were impressed by the saint's daughters and granddaughters. Seeing their beauty, their deportment, their clothing, and their admirable qualities, the envoys agreed that Philaret's granddaughter, Maria was exactly what they were looking for. This Maria exceeded all her rivals in quality and modesty and indeed became Constantine's wife, and the emperor rewarded Philaret.

Thus fame and riches returned to Philaret. But just as before, this holy lover of the poor generously distributed alms and provided a feast for the poor. He and his family served them at the meal. Everyone was astonished at his humility and said: "This is a man of God, a true disciple of Christ."

He ordered a servant to take three bags and fill one with gold, one with silver, and one with copper coins. When a beggar approached, Philaret ordered his servant to bring forth one of the bags, whichever God's providence would ordain. Then he would reach into the bag and give to each person, as much as God willed.

St Philaret refused to wear fine clothes, nor would he accept any imperial rank. He said it was enough for him to be called the grandfather of the Empress. The saint reached ninety years of age and knew his end was approaching. He went to the Rodolpheia ("The Judgment") monastery in Constantinople. He gave

some gold to the Abbess and asked her to allow him to be buried there, saying that he would depart this life in ten days.

He returned home and became ill. On the tenth day he summoned his family, he exhorted them to imitate his love for the poor if they desired salvation. Then he fell asleep in the Lord. He died in the year 792 and was buried in the Rodolpheia Judgment monastery in Constantinople.

The appearance of a miracle after his death confirmed the sainthood of Righteous Philaret. As they bore the body of the saint to the cemetery, a certain man, possessed by the devil, followed the funeral procession and tried to overturn the coffin. When they reached the grave, the devil threw the man down on the ground and went out of him. Many other miracles and healings also took place at the grave of the saint.

After the death of the righteous Philaret, his wife Theoseba worked at restoring monasteries and churches devastated during a barbarian invasion.

This merciful saint trusted God the Spiritual Father. He cashed in on the promise, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well."

In terms of how to survive an economic depression, the right question to ask is *not*, "Do I have enough treasures stored up on earth?" but "Do I have enough treasures in Heaven?" And the merciful St. Philaret lived a life out of abundant treasure in Heaven.

The biggest thing we need right now is to know the point of life, which is to live the life of Heaven, not starting at death, but starting here on earth. C.S. Lewis lectured to students on the eve of World War II when it looked like Western civilization was on the verge of permanent collapse. I won't try to repeat what he said beyond "Life has never been normal" and add that God's providence is for

difficult circumstances every bit as much as when life seems normal. God's providence is how we can survive an economic depression. The Sermon on the Mount is no mere wish list only for when life that is perfect; it is meant for God's work with us even in circumstances we would not choose, *especially* in circumstances we would not choose, and speaks of the love of God the Spiritual Father who can and will work with us in an economic depression, if we will let him, and work with us no less than when life is easy.

(Some have said not only that God provides in rough times as well as easy times, but that God's providence is in fact clearer in rough times, such as an economic depression, than when things go our way and we can forget that we need a bit of help from above.)

God the Spiritual Father wants to use everything for our good. Everything he allows, everything in our lives, is either a blessing or a temptation that has been allowed for our strengthening. His purpose even in allowing rough things to happen is to help us grow up spiritually, and to make us Heavenly. *The Great Divorce* imagines a busload of people come from Hell to visit Heaven, and what happens is something much like what happens in our lives: they are offered Heaven and they do not realize Heaven is better than the seeds Hell that they keep clinging to because they are afraid to let go. Heaven and Hell are both real, but God does not send people to Hell. C.S. Lewis quotes someone saying that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "*Thy* will be done," respecting their choice to choose Hell after Heaven has been freely offered to them. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the inside. Hellfire is nothing other than the Light of Heaven as experienced by those who reject the only possibility for living joy there is. And neither the reality of Heaven nor the state of mind we call Hell begins after death; their seeds grow on us in this training ground we call life. We can become saints, heavenly people like St. Philaret, or we can

care only about ourselves and our own survival. God the Spiritual Father wants to shape us to be part of the beauty of Heaven, and everything he sends us is intended for that purpose. But in freedom he will let us veto his blessings and choose to be in Hell.

Heaven is generous, and that generosity was something Heavenly that shone during the Great Depression. People who had very little shared. They shared money or food, if they had any. (And even if you have no money to share, you can share time; if you do not have a job, you can still volunteer.) St. Philaret shared because he knew something: "Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about 'these least ones' (Mt. 25:40)..." In this part of the saint's life, the reference is to some of the most chilling words following The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?"

And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

St. Philaret the Merciful will be greeted before Christ's awesome judgment seat and hear, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I came to you and asked for a little wheat, and you gave me all six bushels you had, and your only donkey with them." God did provide, but the reward is not just that a friend gave him forty bushels of wheat. The ultimate reward is that Christ regards how St. Philaret treated other people as how he treated Christ himself, and because St. Philaret was merciful, there is a reward for him in Heaven, a reward so great that next to it, the forty bushels of wheat from his friend utterly pale in comparison.

Remember this next time you see a beggar. If you can't give a quarter, at least see if there is a kind word or a prayer you can give. This has everything to do with how to survive an economic depression.

We are at a time with terrible prospects for earthly comfort, but take heart. Let me again quote Lewis: "Heaven

cannot give earthly comfort, and earth cannot give earthly comfort either. In the end, Heavenly comfort is the only comfort to be had. To quote from my own "Silence: Organic Food for the Soul:"

Do you worry? Is it terribly hard
to get all your ducks in a row,
to get yourself to a secure place
where you have prepared for what might happen?
Or does it look like you might lose your job,
if you still have one?
The Sermon on the Mount
urges people to pray,
"Give us this day our daily bread,"
in an economy
when unlike many homeless in the U.S. today,
it was not obvious to many
where they would get their next meal.
And yet it was this Sermon on the Mount
that tells us our Heavenly Father will provide for us,
and tells us not to worry:
what we miss
if we find this a bit puzzling,
we who may have bank accounts, insurance,
investments
even if they are jeopardized right now,
is that we are like a child with some clay,
trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay horse,
with clay that never cooperates, never looks right,
and obsessed with clay that is never good enough,
we ignore and maybe fear
the finger tapping us on our shoulder
until with great trepidation we turn,
and listen to the voice say,
"Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
and follow our father
as he gives us a warhorse.

This life is an apprenticeship, and even now, when we may be in situations we do not like, God is asking us to be apprentices, learning to be knights riding the warhorse he gives us *even in the situations we might not like*. The life of Heaven begins on earth, *even in an economic depression*.

However much power world leaders may have, God the Spiritual Father is sovereign, and their summits pale in comparison for the work God the Spiritual Father is working even now.

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his Christ, saying,
"Let us rip apart their religious restrictions,
and throw off their shackles."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.

Psalms

For the conqueror says: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped."

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

Isaiah

World leaders may work his will as instruments or as sons, but they will always work his will. This is true in an economic depression as much as any other time. God the Spiritual Father rules the world as sovereign on a deeper level than we can imagine, and he works good out of everything to those who love him and are called according to his purpose to make them sons of God.

Some people really hope that if the right government programs are in place, we can get back on track to a better life. But even if governments have their place, "Put not your trust in princes," or rather, "Do not put your trust in governments," is not obsolete. Far from it: government initiatives cannot make everything better, even in the long haul, even with lots of time, sacrifices, and resources. But having given that bad news, I have good news too. Even if government initiatives fail to do what we want them to, we have God the Spiritual Father trying to give us the greatest good, and the time he offers us his will does not start sometime in the future: it is for *here*, and it is for **now**. He works his will alike through instruments like Satan and Judas, and sons like Peter and John, but in either case he works his will now, not sometime in the future when some human effort starts achieving results. Again, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man might become god and the sons of God.

St. Maximus Confessor

There was one time when two theology professors were talking when the weather was very rough. One of them said, "This is the day that the Lord has made," and the other said,

"Well, he's done better!" And the joke may be funny, but sun and rain, heat and cold, are all given by God. We miss something if we only think God is working with us if it is warm and sunny, if we find ourselves in a violent storm and assume God must have abandoned us, if it seems that God can't or won't help us because the weather is so bad.

And we are missing something if we look at the news and the world around us, and want to say, "This is the day that the Lord has made... he's done better!"

If we are in an economic depression, say, "This is the day that the Lord has made." You're missing something if you need to add, "Well, he's done better!"

A friend quoted to me when I was in a rough spot,

"Life's Tapestry"

Behind those golden clouds up there
the Great One sews a priceless embroidery
and since down below we walk
we see, my child, the reverse view.
And consequently it is natural for the mind to see
mistakes
there where one must give thanks and glorify.

Wait as a Christian for that day to come
where your soul a-wing will rip through the air
and you shall see the embroidery of God
from the good side
and then... everything will seem to you to be a system
and order.

And it is true. It is not just, as some have said, that *God's address is at the end of your rope*. That is where you meet God best. It may be easier, not harder, to find God and his providential care in an economic depression. God is working a plan of eternal glory. Westminster opens with the great question, "What is the chief end of man?" and

answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." But there is a deeper answer. *The chief end of man is to become Christ.* The chief end of man is to become by grace what Christ is by nature. God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man and the sons of man might become gods and the sons of God. The Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. The divine became human that the human might become divine. This saying has rumbled down through the ages: not only the entire point of being human, but the entire point of each and every circumstance God the Spiritual Father allows to come to us, as a blessing or as a temptation allowed for our strengthening, as God's will working through instruments or sons, is to make us share in Christ's divinity, and the saints' lives show few saints who met this purpose when everything went their way, and a great many where God worked in them precisely in rough and painful circumstances. If we watch the news and say, "This is the day the Lord has made. Well, he's done better," try to open your eyes to the possibility that "Well, he's done better" is what people want to say when, in the words of C.S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, "Aslan is on the move."

Christ's Incarnation is humble. It began humbly, in the scandalous pregnancy of an unwed teen mother, and it unfolds humbly in our lives. Its humble unfolding in our lives comes perhaps best when we have rough times and rough lives, in circumstances we would not choose, in an economic depression above all. You do not understand Christ's Incarnation unless you understand that it is an Incarnation in humility, humble times, and humble conditions. You do not understand Christ's humble Incarnation until you understand that it did not stop when the Mother of God's scandalous pregnancy began: Christ's humble Incarnation unfolds and unfurls in the Church, in the Saints, and Christ wishes to be Incarnate in every one of us. Christ wishes to be Incarnate in all of us, not in the circumstances we would choose for ourselves, but in the

circumstances we are in, when God the Spiritual Father works everything to good for his sons.

Take heart if this sounds hard, like a tall order to live up to. It is hard for me too. It is hard, very hard, or at least it is for me. But it is worth trying to live up to. Even if we do not always succeed.

God became man that man might become God. In whatever circumstances God gives us to train us, as God the Spiritual Father, let us grow as sons of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

More Than Royalty

One element I remember from a documentary video at Avery Coonley School was talking about some Native American cultures. They commented that, like Christianity, there was an origins myth in which they were placed in a garden, a Paradise. But unlike Christianity, there was no story of leaving Paradise. And yet in Orthodoxy, we insist that Paradise is wherever the saints are. (*Paradise can be every bit here and now!*)

There are certain ways that this is not an obvious thing to say for Christianity, especially if Hell exists, and great saints are often sanctified through great suffering. However, I wish to say more than I said in “God the Spiritual Father,” in which I said that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but we live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that makes all the difference.

There is something more to say, but words begin to fail me.

One point where we are in paradise is that every moral injunction, insofar as Orthodox asceticism is moral, is not for God’s benefit, but for ours. St. Maximus Confessor describes three grades of sonship: *slaves* obey God out of fear of punishment, *mercenaries* obey God for Heavenly reward, but *sons* obey God out of love. And the *Philokalia* contains the striking statement that we owe more to Hell than to Heaven, because more people have obeyed God out of the fear of Hell than out of desire for the delights of

Paradise. Nonetheless, if the highest growth is to obey God out of love for him, *we* are the beneficiaries of our obedience and love. We can be saved from Hell by fearing the torments, or we can grow to seek Heaven's rewards, or we can love as the least inadequate kind of response to God, but we do not benefit God. In the best spirit of demythologizing, it can be said that God is perfect from all eternity and has never had needs except in the person of your neighbor, and God is fundamentally beyond being made more perfect by our acts or our love, no matter how much we love him. We benefit *ourselves* the more we obey God out of love for him.

In something of the same sense, ambition, which includes trying to become a bishop, is a sin, but when things are rightly understood, there is a sense in which we cannot overreach and we cannot reach so high as to be guilty of overreaching ambition. Now maybe ecclesiastical office need not be sought after (but I do not condemn honorable seminarians in the world). However, when we talk about what is good for us, about humility, about prayer, about repentance, we cannot reach too far. And humility is a greater thing than the Philosopher's Stone or the Holy Grail, as I just barely graze on in "The Treasure of Humility and the Royal Race:" in short, it opens your eyes and mine to the godlike beauty with which God has imbued every single human being. Humility transforms everything, or rather it transforms us so that we can be in Paradise anywhere. And monks may be forbidden to seek the lowest of elevations, let alone seek to be the next Ecumenical Patriarch, but there is no degree of the treasure of humility I know of that will bring a confessor's rebuke of "Do you really think such a lofty humility is fitting for someone in your undistinguished rank? Have some more pride like the rest of us!" And humility, in monastics or in the world, is a far greater treasure than any external honor that is to be had. Humility may sometimes be *followed* by ecclesiastical rank, but the real high estate doesn't wait for ecclesiastical office which

may or may not come. The treasure and reward of humility is there, immediately, not just sometime later when authorities decide you are ready to bear a heavier cross and push you out of the nest for a greater service.

I would like to comment, very inadequately, on the monastic vow of wealth. It is said well enough that monastics renounce possessions and Orthodox in the world are to practice generosity and detachment, but he who renounces all possessions ends up with God Himself as pre-eminent among *many* possessions. The words “Do not store up treasure on earth” are but a shadow to “Store up treasures in Heaven,” and monasticism is scarcely more nor less than a community framework for storing up still more treasures in Heaven. The Gospel may censure the man who stores up treasures on earth and tears down his barns to build bigger barns: but in and out of monasticism Orthodox are summoned to reach positions where their barns are not big enough for the treasures in Heaven they have come to possess, and they need to tear down their spiritual barns and build up bigger barns. The Gospel implies nothing positive about the man who has great earthly wealth while considering himself much too poor and wearing himself out to acquire even more wealth, but God’s fullest blessings are on the monk who considers himself to have no appreciable treasures in Heaven and lives an insatiable desire to get even more treasures in Heaven. The monk who rejects an earthly endowment of wealth is instead given an incomparable Providence that gives him treasures he didn’t know to seek. Royalty have such privilege that they are not to touch money: monasticism takes this treasure to the utmost. The monk has lost two hundred and thirty-nine pounds in one vow: if you want to know true treasure, monks have the greatest treasure of all, in this world in the next. St. Constantine, equal to the apostles and great among princes, told one monk that if he had known what rewards monks have in Heaven, he would have exchanged his royal purple for a monk’s robes immediately. Monasticism is a

unique realm of privilege in the Church. (And the security provided by merely earthly wealth is an illusion and does not compare to the Providence given to married and monastic who do not put their trust in riches.)

What does monastic work pay for a monastic or pilgrim? The answer “100% below minimum wage” is positively misleading. The coin which monastic work pays in, and is more important to a spiritual father than getting work done, is healing from our passions, and freedom from our sins is a coin which no amount of secular money is worth. As regards what monks receive by their labor, I would appeal to the Song of Songs: “Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all the substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned.”

All this and more is to be said of monasticism, but it is also to be said that monasticism is no more than the rudiments of the Gospel. If you do not have a monastic spiritual father, all that really means is that you have God for a Spiritual Father. Monastics insist that salvation is possible at every time and everywhere, and is offered to all. However spectacular the blessings of monasticism sound, God’s blessings are offered everywhere. If you should be a monk, by all means become a monk. But if not, do not believe that the God who created and governs all of Creation cares for monks but does not care for you. Christ died for you, and you are made in the divine image to ascend to the divine likeness whether or not monasticism is your path. God has loved you from everlasting to everlasting, and even your ability to choose between Heaven and Hell is part of the glory he built into you.

Moreover the saints, and we are invited to this, are not dependent on their efforts succeeding. We often think of moral victory like a consolation prize, as a palliative to essential failure, but the saints don’t. St. Paul at the end of his life, when he had greater external achievement than almost anyone since, wrote to St. Timothy, “I have fought

the good fight. I have run the race. I have kept the faith.” St. Paul, saint that he was, seemed to consider his moral victories of being faithful as more worthy of mention than external victories that included planting churches, writing half the books of the New Testament, and healing and even raising the dead. He did not need to be successful, and his gargantuan external successes were never mentioned when he claimed a faithfulness that many others can share. There is a crushing character to needing to succeed, and the example of the saints is liberating. We don’t need to *succeed*, however noble our endeavor may be. We need only pray and be *faithful*.

We live in a spiritual and visible world, and some say that man, as the recapitulation of the spiritual and visible worlds, as microcosm of all Creation, is higher than even the angels. And in this world, there are devils and there is evil, but the devils are always and only on a leash. Meanwhile, the Church Triumphant, the Holy Trinity and every saint before, is watching and cheering us as we run the race. The Church has been called a large yet extremely close-knit family, and every saint standing before the throne of God is praying, or is willing to pray, for us.

And the world we live in is *real*. I am not the only person who has wanted to escape into another world; small literature brings escape from the world while great literature brings engagement with the world. I’ve wanted to be in Narnia, among other places, and C.S. Lewis says that many kids have their own little world, but for the children, it was real. And this world we are in is itself real. It may not be in its final greatness yet. But it is real and still profoundly great, and after one spiritual adventure I came to realize that being in communion with Christ, I was in a certain sense in communion with all Creation, with the stars in the sky and the starfish in the sea, and insofar as the human person is constituted in the image of the Trinity, I was more in communion with the heretics than they were with themselves. I am not sure this is officially endorsed

language; but I do know that I reached the brink of death and Hell, and my salvation consisted in rejecting a passion of alienation with Creation, and that I am in fact in communion with the Orthodox Church, in communion with God, and in communion with Creation.

Even suffering has meaning. Before I became Orthodox, as a Protestant I said that Purgatory seemed to be a spiritual reality present on earth, whether or not it was a place after death. Now Orthodoxy has been clear in not preaching that some must pass through Purgatory to reach Heaven: but we share in the sufferings of Christ, and spiritual giants suffer more. Part of this is “No servant is greater than his master,” but suffering in our lives is neither random nor meaningless. Marriage and monasticism are both intended to be a crown of thorns to help us grow up; and unlike the world assumed by certain Church Fathers, we live in a world where blessed marriage is almost as much an exceptional holy light as monasticism, and it should be recognized both that marriage and monasticism serve the same goal of self-transcendence, and are different positions on one and the same team.

In *The Orthodox Church*, Vladyka KALLISTOS compares Christians today to the Early Church in terms of what society Christians are surrounded in. He does not make the complaint in ages past, when ancient Roman persecution ended and a saint said that easy times rob the Church of her saints. Now we live in times more reminiscent in pagan terms of Ragnarok or the Kali-Yuga, where Norse paganism sided with the good gods because they wanted to go down losing on the right side. But this is precisely not the Christian situation. It is more like a business with unrestricted Facebook use, where some people spent all their work hours sunk into social media, while the worker bees became even more focused. Things are darker outside for Christians, but for many the divine light shines more starkly. I have been blessed.

I have titled this piece “More Than Royalty” because

whatever is distinctive about royalty, or giftedness, or wealth is a shadow compared to what is built into the human constitution in the divine image. The reference is obvious:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paradise is wherever the saints are! (What more is there to say?)