

Bible Study Notes for April 19, 2016

During Great Lent the daily scripture readings are mainly from the Old Testament, in contrast to the rest of the year, when the daily readings are from the New Testament. As mentioned by Fr. Seraphim Slobodskoy in the The Law of God “*The period from the creation of the world to the coming of the Saviour to earth is called the Old Testament, that is, the covenant or agreement of God with men, according to which God prepared men for the reception of the promised Saviour. Men were to remember the promise of God, to believe, and await the coming of Christ.*” In essence, this sums up the general purpose of the entire Old Testament—to prepare mankind for the coming of Christ.

In the Lenten Triodion, Bishop Kallistos Ware explains, “...Lent is an annual return to our Biblical roots. It is more specifically a return to our roots in the Old Testament...The Psalter is normally read through once a week (during the rest of the year), but during Lent, it is read in its entirety twice each week....The scheme of Old Testament readings in the Lenten Triodion was perhaps worked out between the 5th and 7th century. The three daily lessons are taken from the three main categories of Old Testament Literature: historical books (Genesis & Exodus), the prophets (Isaiah & Ezekiel) and the Wisdom literature (Proverbs & Job)...Genesis describes the fall of man and his expulsion from Paradise, which is a dominant motif throughout the Triodion. In the lessons from Exodus, Moses foreshadows Christ, the Old Passover anticipates the New and the crossing of the Red Sea prefigures the redemptive death and rising of the Saviour. Isaiah begins with an appeal for repentance and fasting. Ezekiel speaks of God’s glory...The ethical instruction in Proverbs reminds us that Lent is a time for moral effort: to repent is not merely to experience certain emotions, but on the level of practical conduct, to alter our way of life with the help of God’s grace. If we find the readings from Proverbs dull and look for something more ‘dramatic’ and ‘exciting,’ this shows that we want to run before we have learnt to walk. The patient sufferings of Job and his final vindication point forward to the Passion & Resurrection of Christ...”

We often find links between passages of Scripture from the Old Testament in the New Testament, for the New Testament fulfills all that the Old Testament prepared us for and calls us to a higher level of spiritual life in the new era that Christ ushered in. As Orthodox Christians, we need to have at least a basic familiarity with the Old Testament in order to more fully understand the New Testament.

There are three main Old Testament readings appointed for today: Isaiah 49:6-10 (at the Sixth Hour); Genesis 31:3-16 and Proverbs 21:3-21 (at Vespers).

In today's reading from Isaiah 49:8 we read, *"In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you."* This verse is also quoted by St. Paul in his 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians 6:2 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation' says St. Paul. In other words, the day of salvation is now, always the present moment in the period before Christ's return.

The reading from Genesis 31:3-16 takes place after the scheming of Jacob's uncle Laban. When Jacob first came to work for him, he agreed to work for seven years in exchange for the promise of marrying his youngest daughter Rachel. However, Laban deceived Jacob and went back on his agreement under the pretense that the eldest daughter must be married first, and so Jacob had to marry Leah and then agree to work for another seven years after which he was able to marry Rachel, and eventually returned home to his father. Again, from the Law of God, *"The Lord, in special, mystical circumstances, tested the strength of Jacob and gave him a new name, Israel, which means "contender with God." Thus Jacob became the founder of the people Israel, that is, the Hebrews."*

Concerning the two wives, St. Andrew of Crete says in his 'Great Canon' *"By the two wives understand action and direct knowledge in contemplation: Leah as action, for she had many children, and Rachel as knowledge, which is obtained by much labor. For without labors my soul, neither action nor contemplation will achieve success."*

And in Proverbs 21:3, we read that *"righteousness and justice are more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice."* There is an edifying account from The Paradise of the Holy Fathers (incl. Athanasius of Alexandria, Palladius of Helenopolis, et.al.):

"A certain brother committed an offence in Scete, the camp of the monks, and when a congregation was assembled on this matter, they sent after Abba Moses, but he refused to come; then they sent the priest of the church to him saying 'Come, for all the people are expecting you,' and he rose up and came. And he took a basket with a hole in it and filled it with sand, and carried it on his shoulders, and those who went out to meet him said to him, 'What does this mean, father?' And he said to them '[the sands are] my sins which are running down behind me and I cannot see them, and I, even I, have come this day to judge shortcomings which are not mine.' And when they heard this they set free that brother and said nothing further to him"

Had the assembly condemned and punished the one who committed the offence, this would have been a type of sacrifice—the fulfilling of the legal aspects of God’s Law. However, St. Moses demonstrated how his sins were like grains of sand pouring out behind him so that he could not even see them all and so did not want to judge someone else’s shortcomings. All were convicted by his righteousness and true justice, for all had as many or more sins than this godly man.

In a similar way, we read in John 8 when the woman who had been caught in the sin of adultery and was brought before Christ for judgement and death by stoning. Christ knelt down and wrote in the sand. Then he said to them, *“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone at her. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.”*

In this season of Great Lent, we are called to spiritual renewal. Yet, it often happens that as we walk the spiritual path which is our Christian life; we can get lost and go down a false path that leads nowhere. This can be due to our own confusion and distraction or even our own pride in being certain we are always right. However, there must come a point at which we realize that we are lost and it is then that we must retrace our steps in order to find our way back to the right path. Going back to the Old Testament is very clarifying and illuminating. While we primarily focus upon the New Testament throughout the year, Great Lent is a time when we take a step back in order to regroup and focus on the things that are most important. The righteous and faithful prophets and virtuous ones of the Old Testament are a witness to a right belief in God and form a bridge as it were to the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the salvation of all mankind!

Let us give thanks to our merciful God Who gave us the Sacred Scriptures for our benefit and to help lead us back to our true home: the Kingdom of Heaven! Amen!