



## Orthodox Church of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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### *Those Whom He loves, He Chastens* *February 4, 2024*

**Brothers and Sisters in Christ:**

**Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ... For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves and chastises every son whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:1-2, 6)*

I think the book of Hebrews is one of the most difficult of all epistles to interpret, especially this part where St. Paul speaks about God "chastening" those whom He loves. The key to understanding it, is to read it within the context of the theology in which it is written. It is addressed to those who are coming from the ancient faith of the chosen nation of Israel to their acceptance Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed One, the Incarnate God in the flesh and blood of a human man. God allows humanity to suffer want, to be chastened, even in the turmoil of human war or sickness or whatever they must endure so that we are aware of our need for Him and His Kingdom, the One Thing in Life truly needful.

There is a whole element in Russian Orthodox Theology that speaks of suffering as beneficial. It is difficult for us to understand, isn't it? I think It can only be understood in context of what St. Paul says in the his epistle to the Hebrews. And that is, that our loving God allows us to be chastened as a means to be drawn into the realization that without Him, we are nothing, we can do nothing, and we are truly

lost.

Last week our Gospel lesson spoke of a man who did not realize this. He had everything life could offer. Wealth, comfort, the accolades of others. He was evidently a pious man who kept the commandments and practiced the externals of the religion. But, he lacked the kind of reliance and dependency on God that is actually true faith. That's what faith is. It trust in God. It is looking to God for help rather than to something or someone else; it is relying on God rather than on one's own wealth or on the support of others. When he went to Jesus, perhaps to test Him or to ask Him genuinely from the heart what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to obey the commandments. The rich man replied, perhaps honestly enough, that he already did those things. Jesus said he still lacked the one thing needful. He needed to let go of the one passion that still held him captive. He needed to give up the riches he still relied upon and give them to the poor. This the rich man was not willing to do, and he turned away and left.

The Holy Fathers in their wisdom, however, chose another lesson that contrasts with last week's lesson for us to hear today. Today we hear about a different a man with a different condition; not one with a particular passion, but one who is chastened with a terrible illness, blindness. Unlike the rich man, he knows precisely what is wrong with him, and he knows precisely of his need and that he cannot escape it try though he might. He cries out to Jesus for help: Son of David, have mercy on me! When Jesus asks what he wants, he says simply and clearly, "Heal me." Faith always begins like this. Recognition of need and crying to God for help. It always comes after we become aware of our need and of our helplessness. Suffering is therefore often a blessing, because it can be a gift from God, an aid sent like a wind blowing a leaf into the waiting hands of God. Obviously, it can lead just as easily to bitterness and resentment. But, the Spirit also blows where He wills, and helps us to find our voice to cry out and say, "Son of David, Have mercy on me!"

When we come to God in our need like the blind man, we do not have to prove ourselves by acts of immense piety or by many days of fasting. We need only ask. And we need to ask humbly and consistently. God will hear. And let no one silence us in our prayer; pay no attention to those around us who say like the people around the blind man, "let it go; God does not hear you." God always hears; and He always, always answers." He chastises those whom He loves, so that like the blind man, you may ask, "Lord, Help me!"

To Jesus Christ be all honor and glory forever! Amen.

Fr. Elias

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