



Bible Study

May 20, 2015

Acts 18:22-28

John 12:36-47

Acts 18:22-28 (NKJV) -

And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch. After he had spent some time there, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples. Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John. So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

John 12:36-47 (NKJV) - "While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light." These things Jesus spoke, and departed, and was hidden from them. But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them." These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him. Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. Then Jesus cried out and said, "He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me. And he who sees Me sees Him who sent Me. I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world."

Commentary -

Today's readings from the Holy Scriptures, both from the Acts of the Apostles and from the Gospel of John, draw into focus the mystery of Israel's unbelief. Though Christ made clear, following

His Resurrection, the ways in which all of the Law and the Prophets spoke concerning Him, it is made clear by the Gospel writers that even His closest disciples did not fully understand who He is and what He was doing though He was right before their eyes. More to the point, though He is Israel's Messiah, He came to His own, but His own received Him not. The vast majority of the people of Judea, both living at home and throughout the Roman Empire, not only failed to recognize that Jesus is the Christ, but became actively hostile to Jesus Himself, and then later to St. Paul as he travelled to spread the Gospel message.

That most of those genetically descended from Abraham, those who had been called by God and been party to the Old Covenant, had fallen away, with only a small remnant becoming the basis of a new people of God, the Church, under the New Covenant in Christ was considered a problem by St. Paul himself, who spend much of Romans 9-11 explaining this mystery. The Apostle concludes that they have fallen away because of faithlessness, and that despite their faithlessness, God has used their falling away to bring the Gentiles into His covenant. By this, however, he does not simply mean that they did not believe the words that Jesus spoke concerning Himself or that St. Paul spoke about Him. Rather, he means that they did not believe those words because they were not faithful to God, specifically to God's covenant with them. They did not recognize their God in person, standing before them, because sin had blinded their spiritual vision.

That this would happen was prophesied from the very beginning. In Deuteronomy 30, the Lord summarizes His covenant with Israel, setting before the people life and death, blessings and curses, and calls upon them on that day to choose. In listing the curses of the Law, the consequences of sin and disobedience culminate in the Greek version of Deuteronomy with the statement: "Your Life will hang before your eyes...and you will not believe (have faith) in your Life." (28:66). God had promised, beginning in Deuteronomy, that though Israel would violate the covenant and do great evil, and this would result in Israel's exile from the land, that Israel's Lord would return to her to redeem and rescue her, and to make her a light to all the nations. But the darkness of sin was so thick and so overwhelming, that when the Lord returned to visit His people, they not only failed to recognize Him and believe, but they killed Him and later murdered those sent by Him, just as they had murdered the prophets whom He had sent before time.

In today's Gospel reading, Christ Himself ties together faith and faithfulness. He refers to believing in Him, and keeping His words interchangeably. This is because it is impossible to have faith without faithfulness. It is impossible to truly encounter Christ and to walk away unchanged. It is, however, possible to have fallen so far into sin, and to be so far away from God, so lacking in the knowledge of God, that we do not recognize Him when we see Him, or hear His voice clearly when He speaks. It is possible for us, even as religious people, to craft a God, or craft a version of Jesus in our minds other than the only true God, other than the Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and to worship that false image because we prefer it over the real thing. The God that we like to imagine for ourselves only ever asks us for what we are already willing to give, and only wants us to be the person who we already are.

Many times, Christians seek guidance from the Lord for their lives. They want to know what 'God's Will' is regarding what they should do for a career, who and when and if they should marry, where and how they should invest money, and the answers to countless other questions sometimes even down to the minutiae of daily life. Some of our Christian brothers and sisters use unique devices to try to determine what the right answers to these questions might be, from randomly opening Bibles to praying and attempting to interpret subjective feelings to looking for 'signs' in daily events. These are our modern and christianized version of the divination practices of our ancestors, who sought the future through 'reading' the entrails of animals or seeking the advice of demon possessed oracles.

To look once again to Deuteronomy, the Lord said there, "The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like [Moses] from your own brothers. You

must listen to him...I will raise up a prophet like [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.” (18:14,15,18,19). The Lord does not intend the prophets to replace divination by predicting the future. Rather, the prophet will call the people back to the Word of God, to obey it. Compare what Christ says in the verses immediately following today's Gospel reading: “He who rejects Me and does not receive My words, has that which judges him – the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak.” (John 12:48-50).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the answer to all of our questions regarding what the Lord would have us do in our lives, both concerning large issues and small, is obedience. We are called first and foremost to be obedient to the Lord in those areas which are clear to us. By entering into repentance for the sins which we commit, and striving to be obedient to the will of God as it has been revealed to us in the Holy Spirit, through the Church, through the Holy Scriptures, through our spiritual fathers we will draw closer to God and our spiritual blindness will be healed, enabling us to see clearly, and to discern rightly what we should do in every part of our life. As Christ has promised us, if we are faithful with a little, we will be given much more. If we continue in sin, we estrange ourselves from God, and wander into a dark place with no landmarks to guide us, becoming lost. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleans us from all unrighteousness. In so doing, our feet are placed again on the path that leads to everlasting life in faithfulness to God and His Word.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) In today's epistle reading, we see Apollos practicing a blend of both zeal and humility. He practices zeal in going forth and proclaiming the Truth as it has been revealed to him, even if only partially. He shows humility in being willing to be corrected and educated by Priscilla and Aquila. Do you share Apollos' zeal for the Orthodox Faith, or do you remain silent about or even hide your faith? Do you share Apollos' humility, in being willing to be corrected and taught, or do you think you have all the answers and become defensive and argue when someone attempts to correct or instruct you?
- 2) Both Christ Himself and the Apostle Paul experienced rejection and persecution, even violent persecution ending in death over the course of their lives due to proclaiming the Truth. How do you respond to rejection of yourself and your ideas? Do you become embittered and judgmental toward those who reject you? Do you hide who you are and what you believe, especially your faith, out of fear of rejection, or fear of negative consequences?
- 3) None of us is without sin. Fortunately, due to the Lord's abundant mercy and love for mankind, the obedience that God requires from us includes repentance and forgiveness. When we decide that we need to get our lives back on the right path, repentance is the place to start. Are you faithful to the teaching of the Church, the commandments of Christ, and the guidance of your spiritual father? Are you punctual in going to confession when you know you have violated them? If you are currently struggling with knowing what God would have you do in some area, are there sins that you are holding on to and of which you are not repenting which might be blinding you to the correct path?

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