

SERMON ON ROMANS 8:28-39, 2 COR. 6:1-10, SEPTEMBER 24, 2017

We heard today of the many afflictions and temptations that the Christians and mankind in general face: persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, the sword and death. Much of the Old Testament is the story of the struggle of the Hebrews who believed that their God acted in history, who received the assurance of their God's protection and might, and yet witnessed their nation and Temple destroyed, not once, but twice, and who lived much of their existence in slavery and poverty, not only under foreign rulers, but even often under their own Hebrew Kings. It is well known that for the first 300 years of its existence the practice of Christianity was illegal. This ended in the year 313 with the issuance of the Edict of Milan. Until that time the Christians practiced their faith in secret and in fear, underground, suffering torture and death daily for their belief in our Lord Jesus Christ. More recent history has witnessed an emergence of tyrannical Communist rulers who openly professed atheism and hatred of Christianity and murdered or banished all Christian rulers and created societies of enslavement and concentration camps, where Christians again had to practice their faith in secret and fear and who daily suffered torture and death for their faith in Christ. And worse than all of this are those rulers of today who don't openly confess their atheism or hatred of Christianity, but who openly say that they are Christians and yet are slowly, piece by piece, dismantling and destroying the vestiges of Christ and the Gospel in our laws and society. More and more they are changing our values and way of life into one that is opposed and contrary to Christ.

So my question is this: How is it possible for faith in God and for Christianity to survive through all of this hardship and suffering? How was it and how is it possible to still have faith when there is so much destruction, injustice and death? The key, I believe, are St. Paul's words in his letter to the Romans which we heard today, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." When the blessed Elder Paisios was 15 years old, a friend of his brother's tried to put an end to St. Paisios' faith and asceticism. The brother's friend told the young Paisios about Darwin's theory of evolution. It caused much confusion in the saint's mind, yet his heart could not relinquish its love for Christ. The young saint decided that even if Christ was still just a man, He still deserves love, obedience and self-sacrifice because Christ was so holy and kind. After the Lord let St. Paisios struggle with this inner turmoil for a while and allowed the faith of the saint to be tested, the Lord Himself appeared to St. Paisios. In the hands of our Savior was an open Gospel with the words "I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). With this event, the uncertainties that had troubled the saint's young soul were overcome. When the Lord permitted the righteous Job to suffer so many afflictions and injustices, how did Job react? Incredibly the love of God and faith that Job had was so strong, that his reaction was to say, "I have followed in His tracks, kept His way without swerving, I have not deviated from what His lips commanded; I have treasured His words more than my daily bread...Whatever He desires, He does. For He will bring my term to an end" (Job 23:11-14). There is Fr. Arseny, a Russian priest who was incarcerated in the brutal Soviet prison camp system. How could he survive and even maintain his faith and love of God under such circumstances? Not only did he survive with his faith and love of God intact, but he even managed to minister to his fellow prisoners as a priest. In his own words, Fr. Arseny could see and feel the presence of God in everything. Fr. Arseny was an extraordinary man who was not broken by the years spent in soviet camps, but on the contrary, they only strengthened the power of his spirit. It is nothing short of a miracle that faith and love of God can survive so much oppression, persecution and demonic attacks. It all started with the Hebrews whose faith survived for so many years of hardship. It reached its climax with the messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who had so much love and gave us the example of faith and suffered so much for our sins and for our salvation. It continued with his disciples and all the saints who followed in the Lord's footsteps, maintaining steadfast faith and love for Christ in the face of the most brutal and difficult of

circumstances. God wants our hearts, but the Lord does not compel or force us to love Him. The Lord shows us two paths, the path of salvation, and the path that leads to perdition. It is our choice. Let us choose life. Let us choose love. Let us choose faith and trust in the Lord. If we make this choice and humbly struggle to make our love grow and to cultivate in our hearts love for the Lord, God will take care of all the rest. Just as He sent the Holy Spirit on the disciples at Pentecost, so will the Holy Spirit fill our hearts and minds and strengthen our desire. When a priest is ordained, the bishop lays his hands upon the candidate's head, and invokes the coming down of the Holy Spirit. The bishop prays that the the Divine grace of God would heal that which is weak and fill that which is lacking in the heart and soul of the newly ordained priest. May the Holy Spirit heal our weaknesses, fill that which is lacking within us, and help us to have a strong faith and love for the Lord. Amen.