

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ March 17, 2013 ✠

Forgiveness Sunday

Sunday of Cheesefare

St. Alexis, the Man of God (411)

St. Patrick, Enlightener of Ireland (451)

The gateway to divine repentance has been opened! Let us enter eagerly, purified in our bodies and observing abstinence from food and passions, as obedient servants of Christ, Who has called the world into the heavenly Kingdom! Let us offer to the King of All a tenth part of the year, that we may look with love upon His Resurrection!

~ Matins, Monday of Cheesefare



First Week of Great Lent

✠ Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete: Mon. thru Thurs., March 18 thru 21

✠ First Presanctified Liturgy: Friday, March 22 ... with Potluck Lenten Supper

⇒ Note: All services are at 6:30pm.

⇒ Next Sunday is the Sunday of Orthodoxy – Bring your Icons for the Procession!

⇒ Next Monday is the Feast of the Annunciation ⇒ Vespers Sunday – 2:00pm

✠ Divine Liturgy – Monday, March 25 10:00am ✠

About Repentance and the Forgiveness of Sins

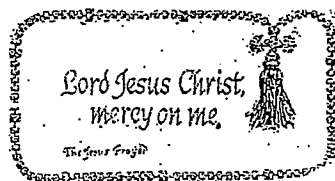
"And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name"(Luke 24:47).

This is the final instruction of the Savior to the holy Apostles. In these words as in the shell of a walnut, is contained the Gospel of reconciliation between God and men. What does God seek from men and what does God give them? **He seeks repentance and He grants forgiveness of sins.** He seeks little but He gives all. Let men only repent for committed sins and let men cease to sin and men will receive all from God; all; not only all that their hearts could desire rather even more, much more. In truth, to the righteous everything is promised. The righteous will be the inheritors of the Kingdom of God, they will be the sons of God, and they will be the children of light, the children of immortality, companions to the angels, brothers of Christ. The righteous will have an abundant life, an abundance of peace, an abundance of wisdom, an abundance of power and an abundance of joy. The righteous will have all, for all has been promised to them.

Let men only repent and they will receive all. Let the beggar only cleanse himself, bathe himself and clothe himself in purity before the doors of the royal court and he will be immediately ushered into the royal court and he will be met and embraced by the king and he will have all. He will live with the king, sit at the royal table; he will have all, all, all!

O my brethren, these are not only words rather this is the living and holy truth. For we know that many penitents, both female and male, received all of this, which was promised. Many have appeared from the other world and have proved the truth of these words, witnessing how they now live as royal sons and daughters. But they repented promptly; and there remains time for us to repent if we desire to be together with them as the heirs of the Kingdom.

O Merciful Lord, help us that we may repent before death in order that we may live eternally!



{St. Nikolai of Ochrid, from the Prologue}

Pearls of the Holy Fathers (10.1)

I shall tell you something strange, but do not be surprised by it. Should you fail to attain dispassion because of the predispositions dominating you, but at the time of your death be in the depths of humility, you will be exalted above the clouds no less than the man who is dispassionate.

St. Theognostus

One of the elders said, "It is written concerning Solomon that he loved women, but every male loveth the females, and we must restrain and draw onwards our nature by main force to purity."

Paradise of the Fathers

O man, take thou the greatest possible care that thou sin not, lest thou disgrace God Who dwelleth in thee, and thou drive Him out of thy soul.

Abba Epiphanius

The evil one cannot comprehend the joy we receive from the spiritual life; for this reason he is jealous of us, he envies us and sets traps for us, and we become grieved and fall. We must struggle, because without struggles we do not obtain virtues.

Elder Ieronymos of Aegina

The enemy of our salvation especially strives to draw our heart and mind away from God when we are about to serve Him, and endeavors to adulterously attach our heart to something irrelevant. Be always, every moment, with God, especially when you pray to Him. If you are inconstant, you will fall away from life, and will cast yourself into sorrow and straitness.

St. John of Kronstadt

There was a man who ate a lot and was still hungry, and another who ate little and was satisfied. The one who ate a lot and was still hungry received a greater reward than he who ate little and was satisfied.

Apophthegmata Patrum

The work of prayer belongs to the angels, and is, therefore, the special concern of the Church. Every other work, i.e., charity, nursing the brethren, visiting the sick, caring for prisoners, releasing captives, and other similar things, is done by the brethren in love and offered by them to God. Similarly, poverty, fasting, sleeping on the ground, prostrations, vigils, etc., are good and like a sacrifice to God, because they aim to subdue and humble the body so that we may be purified and approach God and become friends of God — yet these things do not present us directly to God, whereas prayer does so and unites us with Him. A person praying acts towards God like a friend — conversing, confiding, requesting — and through this becomes one with our Maker Himself.

St. Symeon of Thessalonica

It depends on us whether we wish to be saved.

~ Apophthegmata Patrum

The knowledge of the Cross is concealed in the sufferings of the Cross. ~ St. Isaac the Syrian

Archpastoral Letter of His Beatitude, Metropolitan Jonah

Monday, February 27, 2012

The First Day of Great Lent ~ 2012

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, the Venerable Monastics, and the Christ-loving Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America.

Beloved in Christ:

“Enter again into Paradise!” So the Holy Church sings in the Kontakion at Lent’s mid-point. At a time of year that coincides with college students’ “spring break” –an occasion for riotous and prodigal indulgence in the pigpen of the passions – the Church offers us a very different image of paradise. Fasting, vigil, silence and prayer, denial of self and generosity to others: these are the labors by which we are invited and commanded to regain our true, paradisaal home.

In the three weeks that have led us to this great and solemn first day of the Fast, the Church has set before our spiritual eyes themes of exile. When our ancestors in the faith were led to captivity in Babylon, they wept; they hung up their lyres and said, “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither” (Psalm 136:4–5). The Prodigal Son, at the eleventh hour, was given the grace not to forget his father’s house, and so he set his feet on the path of return. Our father Adam and our mother Eve chose exile and hardship for themselves and all their descendants through their disobedience, and yet they – and we with them – are shown the way home: we see the doors of repentance thrown open, and our loving Father in Heaven keeping watch for our return with open arms.

In Holy Scripture, Jerusalem, the heart of the Promised Land and seat of the Temple, typifies the dwelling place of God among men. When the time came for our Savior to be received up, “He set His face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Making his way to the earthly Jerusalem, He was advancing toward suffering and ignominious death. Yet, “for the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Cast out of the city, suffering outside the gate, He sanctified the people through His own blood. Therefore, the Apostle tells us, we also must “go forth to him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one to come” (Hebrews 13:12–14).

The exiles in Babylon refused to forget Jerusalem. Yearning to return to the land given by God to Abraham, they would not make themselves at home in Babylon. The holy Prophet Daniel and the Three Youths obeyed the dictates of their conscience, even in the face of harsh recrimination from a legal system hostile to righteousness. When opportunity arose, they did not shrink from speaking the truth to those who opposed it and, against all odds, God rewarded their faithful witness (v. Daniel 3 and 6).

If we wish to return home to our Father’s house, we first must face the fact that, no matter where we live, we are exiles. This means that if we strive to follow Christ, if we endeavor to pray and fast, to avoid idle talk, to silence our thoughts and find stillness in our hearts, to love our neighbors and our enemies, and to speak the truth without judgment to a crooked and perverse generation, then we must expect to suffer the same mockery and hatred from the powerful of this world that Christ suffered when He walked the earth. For He is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith,” and He gives us the grace we need to prepare for the abuse that awaits us, whether

at the hands of men or from the devil and his angels. We must ready ourselves for the fight by laying aside "every weight and sin which clings so closely" (Hebrews 12:1). Great Lent is a strenuous period of training that makes us fit to persevere in a long and arduous trek home.

But the ascetic struggle of Lent is truly a foretaste of Paradise! The world pretends to offer happiness, but this is deception; in reality it gives us only a foretaste of hell. For too many Christians, though, the spiritual senses have grown so dull that the hellish pleasures of the world are more attractive than the Edenic delights of the Church and the Kingdom. We have lost the memory of Paradise; we have forgotten the spiritual Jerusalem; we have made for ourselves a comfortable home in this foreign land. So how then can we make a commitment to follow Christ to Jerusalem? What will motivate us to continue walking along the hard and narrow path to our true home?

"Do you want to be made well?" Our Savior addressed this question to the man who was paralyzed thirty-eight years (John 5:6). A similar question could be asked of us: "Do you want to go home?" The answer is not a foregone conclusion. "Do you want to return to your Father's house? Do you want to leave the pigpen of the passions? Do you want to be washed clean, filled with light, robed in dignity, and transformed with the glory of God?" Whether we know it or not, we respond yes or no to these questions every day of our lives, every hour, every minute. One moment we may set our face toward Jerusalem – to the Cross that awaits us there, and to the joy and glory that come only through the Cross – but the next moment we go running back to our comfortable passions and delusions. We waffle and vacillate, reassuring ourselves that before time has run out we will surely have made an irrevocable commitment to Christ.

And we hardly spare a thought for the alternative – it is too fearful to face. The captives in Babylon, the Prodigal, even Adam himself – for all of them, exile came to an end; they returned home; they entered again into Paradise. But last Sunday we were warned of the perilous alternative to repentance: unending exile from God and those who love Him. For no one, neither man nor angel, nor even God Himself, can force us to return from the foreign country against our will. God's arms are opened wide to embrace us – but He gives us the freedom to turn away. His face is warm with love and mercy – but we may close our eyes. Then nothing will be left for us but darkness, confusion, and never-ending despair.

In our Father's house are many dwellings, and Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. He will come again and take us to Himself, that where He is, we may be also. We know the narrow way He has trod. He Himself is the way, and the truth, and the life (cf. John 14: 2–4). If we are with Him, we have nothing to fear!

At the last and great Day, at the end of the age, we will behold the New Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven, prepared as a Bride for her Husband (cf. Revelation 21). With joy we will enter in to celebrate an eternal Pascha – God with us and we with Him. He shall wipe away every tear from our eyes, and at long last we shall be home.

With every blessing for a peaceful and holy Fast, and with love in Christ,

J O N A H,

Archbishop of Washington,
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

PRAY FOR THE REPOSED!

Hieromartyr John of Riga, from Orthodox Life, Vol. 42, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec., 1992), pp. 29-32.

The death of people who are close and dear to us is one of the most difficult trials sent to us by the Lord God during this temporary life. There are no tears more bitter than the tears of a mother for the beloved child of her heart who goes to the grave before his time. What sorrow can we compare to the sorrow of widows and orphans? Nonetheless, our Lord and Saviour turns to these people, the most unfortunate ones in the eyes of the world, saying respectfully, *Do not weep!* The Apostle Paul commands these sorrowing ones, saying, *Do not sorrow!*

What does all this mean? Of course, it does not mean that we should forget those dear loved ones of ours who have departed, that we should cast them out of our hearts. No. We should love them after their death just as we loved them in life. However, we should not sorrow over their death.

Death does not separate us who are Christians from communion in love with those who are dear to us. The Lord Himself has given us the very grace-filled means needed to have communion with them.

The first among these means is prayer. Prayer is the best means for spiritual communion among people who are still alive. The Apostle Paul beseeched the believers to pray continually for him in order that the Lord would grant him strength and power to preach. Likewise, St. Paul prayed for others that the Lord would confirm them in the Faith and in a Christian life. There is no doubt that the prayers of believers strengthened the Apostle and that his prayers strengthened them.

We find an amazing example of the power and action of mutual prayer in the Acts of the Apostles. While St. Peter was in prison sleeping between two guards, *prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him* (Acts 12:5). What was the result of this prayer? During that very night, the Angel of the Lord appeared in the prison, awoke the sleeping Apostle, and led him out of prison.

The power and action of prayer for the souls of the departed is even greater than prayer for the living. There is no greater comfort than prayer and no greater joy than joy in the Lord for those who are separated from their bodies. It is unjust, as some think, to assume that the needs of our departed brethren are unknown to us. However, this is not true. The spiritual needs of the dead are the same as the spiritual needs of the living. The dead need the mercy and goodness of the Heavenly Father, forgiveness and remission

of sins, grace-filled help from God in the fulfillment of all good desires, and the peace and ease of the heart and conscience. These things are most important both for the living and the dead. *Give rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy departed servants* is the continual prayer and best intention of our Mother Church for the souls of Her departed. We should also beseech the Lord with this intention for the departed souls of our own loved ones.

It could be that some soul bound himself with earthly attachments, with earthly cares, and could not be free of them after death. Earthly thoughts about home and cares, about acquiring things, might still tug at this soul, torture him, and not allow him the freedom to strive with heart and soul towards God. We should pray that the Lord will grant rest to such a soul in the quiet harbor of His Kingdom. We should pray that the Lord will destroy and burn up in the fire of His Grace the memory of his earthly cares. We should pray that the Lord will warm this soul with love and with the desire for eternal treasure, that the Lord will give rest

to this soul in the sweetest hope of eternal blessedness.

Perhaps, having confessed at the hour of death, some soul did so quickly, in a confused manner. This soul might have forgotten something because of troubled feelings, and he now grieves over this. Perhaps, this soul did not have time to offer God true repentance, to fully cleanse his sins by tears of compunction. Per-

haps, the awareness of unconfessed and unforgiven sins tear and torture this soul. Pray for this soul who is suffering. Pray that the Lord God might comfort him with the protection of His inextinguishable mercy. Pray that this soul might receive, albeit at this late hour, remission of sins because of his sincere remorse.

Who can enumerate all those bonds with which our soul might bind itself in this lifetime and by which it might remain bound for eternity. One might have been envious of his neighbor in the depths of one's soul and bound himself thus. Another person might have mocked the weakness of His neighbor and become according to the words of the Lord, worthy of Hell. Another person might have lied and as a result became the son of the father of lies. *If Thou shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, O Lord, who shall stand?* Therefore, no matter how holy a man's life might be, no one can be sure that he will pass into the next world completely reconciled with God. No man can say that the prayerful intercessions of those brethren who are left alive are unnecessary for him.

Was not the repentance of St. Ephraim the Syrian sincere and deep? Even he, sensing that his end was near, besought



his brethren, "O Brothers, accompany me into the world above with prayers, psalms, and offerings. Remember me on the fortieth day after my death; because prayers and offerings made by the living help the departed."

Works of charity are another means of communion with the departed. "If you desire to honor the dead, offer a gift for him. Honor him by good works, charitable offerings, and services" (St. John Chrysostom). Send gifts for the reposed through the hands of the poor and the hopeless. In the name of the reposed, do acts of charity to the best of your ability and be assured that your gift will be received by God. Our Lord Jesus Christ has assured us that our gifts will be received, saying, *In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.* (Mt 25:40). Can it be that He Who is all-powerful will remain in debt to us? If you give food and drink to the hungry and the thirsty in His name, then the Lord will fill the soul of your departed brother with the appearance of His light-bearing and joy-filling Image.

It could be that the soul of your relative is ashamed before the holy angels because of his lack of good deeds and because of his wretched sins, and he hides in darkness and in murky depths from the face of God. Clothe the naked; wash the feet of the tired; receive and give rest to the traveler in the name of such a soul; and the merciful Lord will vest this soul in the Garment of His Mercy, will adorn it in the Robe of His justification, will wash its sinful filth in His Most Precious Blood.

It could be that the soul of your friend bound by sins languishes in a dungeon without the vision of God's face. Hurry to a prison and assuage the heart of a suffering prisoner in the name of your departed friend. The Lord will send His bright angels to comfort the soul of your sorrowing friend, to strengthen him with hope, and make him rejoice in the promise of God's mercy.

It could be that a soul has left this world for the spiritual world without having drawn close to the holy inhabitants of that world through prayer; he may have appeared in that higher sphere as one entering a strange and unfamiliar land and may not find any spiritual "relative" in this upper Sion. Take in the stranger; give rest to the beggar; give him a place to rest his head, and the Lord will grant the soul, for whom you do this, one of the bright dwellings in His Father's mansion. The souls of the righteous will receive this soul in bright and joyful communion. St. John Chrysostom says, "If we desire to relieve the sufferings of a sinner, let us do acts of mercy in his name. Though he be unworthy, the Lord will comfort and pity him."

When we pray for the reposed and do charitable works in their name, it is necessary, brethren, to reflect on our own death while there is still time. We should prepare now so that we will not pass into the future life of torture bound

by bonds of sin. No matter how short or how long the Lord has determined that we will live on earth, there is no doubt that our entire present life is a road leading to death and to the threshold of eternity.

There is nothing better or of more value for us to acquire than *a peaceful, blameless, repentant, and Christian end to our life.* He who has lived piously will repose piously. He who has lived with the Lord will die with the Lord. He who zealously serves the Lord before death will be with the Lord after his repose. *Where I am, there shall also My servant be.* For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him.



It is good to pray always and not to lose heart, as the Lord says, And again the Apostle says, *Pray without ceasing,* (Lord Jesus Christ Have Mercy On Me) that is by night and by day and at every hour, and not only when coming into the church, and not bothering at other times. But whether you are working, lying down to sleep, traveling, eating, drinking, sitting at table, do not interrupt your prayer, for you do not know when he who demands your soul is coming (death approaching. . .) Don't wait for Sunday or a feast day, or a different place, but, as the Prophet David says, *in every place of his dominion.*

Whether you are in church, or in your house, or in the country, whether you are guarding sheep, or constructing buildings, or present at drinking parties, do not stop praying. When you are able, bend your knees, when you cannot, make intercession in your mind, *at evening and at morning and at midday.* If prayer precedes your work and if, when you rise from your bed, your first movements are accompanied by prayer, sin can find no entrance to attack your soul.

Lets us also proclaim: With You, Lord, I will flee, that I may gain in You Life in every place. The prison with You is no prison, for in You man goes up into Heaven; the grave with You is no grave, for You are the Resurrection...

St. Ephraim the Syrian



We wish to remind our readers to not neglect sending us their annual contribution to help us cover the costs associated with our humble publication. In addition, we kindly request of those who have the financial ability, that they consider sending us an amount over the requested annual contribution of \$24 to assist us with our educational and philanthropic activities.

THE HOLY MARTYR NICEPHORUS ~ A Lesson in Forgiveness

The biography of this martyr Nicephorus clearly demonstrates how God rejects pride and crowns humility and love with glory. There lived in Antioch two close friends, the learned priest Sapricius and the simple ordinary citizen Nicephorus. Somehow, their friendship turned into a terrible hatred for each other. The God-fearing Nicephorus attempted on many occasions to make peace with the priest. However, at no time did Sapricius desire to be reconciled. When the persecution of Christians began, the presbyter Sapricius was condemned to death and brought to the place of execution. The sorrowful Nicephorus followed after Sapricius beseeching him along the way to, at least, forgive him before his death that they might depart in peace.

"I beseech you, O martyr of Christ," said Nicephorus, "forgive me if I have sinned against you!" Sapricius did not even want to look at his opponent but quietly and arrogantly walked toward his death. Upon seeing the hardness of the priest's heart, God did not want to accept the sacrifice of his martyrdom and to crown him with a wreath but He mysteriously withheld His grace. At the last moment, Sapricius denied Christ and declared before the executioners that he would bow down before the idols. So it is with blind hatred! Nicephorus implored Sapricius not to deny Christ saying: "O my beloved brother, do not do that; do not deny our Lord Jesus Christ; do not forfeit the heavenly wreath!" But, all was in vain. Sapricius remained adamant. Then, Nicephorus cried out to the executioners: "I, also, am a Christian; behead me in place of Sapricius!" The executioners informed the judge of this and he ordered the release of Sapricius and, in his place, beheaded Nicephorus. Nicephorus joyfully lowered his head on the block and was beheaded. Thus, he was made worthy of the kingdom and was crowned with the immortal wreath of glory. This occurred in the year 260 A.D. during the reign of Gallienus.

Lest He Labor in Vain...

Abba David said, "Abba Arsenius told us the following, as though it referred to someone else, but in fact it referred to himself. An old man was sitting in his cell and a voice came to him which said, 'Come, and I will show you the works of men.' He got up and followed. The voice led him to a certain place and showed him an a man cutting wood and making a great pile. He struggled to carry it but in vain. Instead of taking some off, he cut more wood which he added to the pile. He did this for a long time.

Going on a little further, the old man was shown a man standing on the shore of a lake drawing up water and pouring it into a broken receptacle, so that the water ran back into the lake. The voice said to the old man, 'Come and I will show you something else.' He saw a temple and two men on horseback, opposite one another, carrying a piece of wood crosswise. They wanted to go in through the door but could not because they held their piece of wood crosswise. Neither of them would draw back before the other, so as to carry the wood straight; so they remained outside the door. The voice said to the old man, 'These men carry the yoke of righteousness with pride, and do not humble themselves so as to correct themselves and walk in the humble way of Christ. So they remain outside the Kingdom of God. The man cutting the wood is he who lives in many sins and instead of repenting he adds more faults to his sins. He who draws the water is he who does good deeds, but mixing bad ones with them, he spoils even his good works. So, everyone must be watchful of his actions, lest he labor in vain.'

On Eternity

Meditate more often, O Christian, on eternity, that you may the better escape sin. One cannot think of eternity without sighing and fear. Meditation upon eternity makes weeping and tears sweet, it lightens every toil, it teaches us to accept with thanksgiving any temporal punishment, sorrow, offence, dishonor, banishment and death itself; it prevents us from falling into the snare of lawlessness. He who thinks of eternity will seek the word of God and instruction to salvation more than he seeks his daily food.

~ St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

More on Thoughts – Blessed Elder Paisiös of Mt. Athos (+1994)

...Some people tell me, “Geronda, how is it possible for Hell to exist? We worry over a person who is in prison, how much more over one who is in Hell.” But this is a blasphemy, because these people present themselves as being more righteous than God. God knows what He is doing. Do you remember an incident mentioned by Saint Gregory the Dialogist?

Once Bishop Fortunatus expelled a demon from a possessed woman. The demon wondered around the city in the guise of a poor man complaining about the Bishop and saying, “That merciless bishop expelled me.” Someone went up to him and said, “That was not right; how could the bishop do this unjust thing? Come into my home, poor man!” The devil entered into that man’s home and soon enough said, “I am cold; throw some wood on the fireplace.” So the man threw more wood in the fireplace and rekindled the fire. Finally, when the fire was blazing, the devil entered into his child, and the poor child jumped into the fire and was set aflame. It was then that the unfortunate man realized what the discerning bishop had expelled and what he himself had taken into his house. Bishop Fortunatus knew very well what he was doing when he expelled the demon.

— Geronda, could you tell us something about “good indifference”?

“Good indifference” is needed in someone who is overly sensitive and the devil torments him with various thoughts. Then it is helpful to become a little insensitive, in the good sense of the term, and not to analyze certain things too much.

Moreover, this “blessed indifference” is necessary for one who, although normally indifferent to many things, is overly sensitive about one particular thing, something that the devil has developed in him in order to destroy him. In this case it will be helpful to develop this “good indifference” for a period of time. It will require careful observation. He must confess his thought to his Spiritual Father, who will observe him carefully; otherwise, he can gradually level everything down, go to the other extreme and become completely indifferent.

- Geronda, when I feel sad, I have blasphemous thoughts. Why is it that?

It’s like this. When the devil sees you sad, he takes advantage of the situation and offers you a worldly “candy”, a sinful thought. As soon as you fall for the first time, he will lead you to greater sadness and you won’t have the strength to resist. This is why you must never remain in a state of sadness, but strive to do something spiritual that will help you to get out of this state of sorrow.

— Geronda, I am troubled by some thoughts...

It is from the evil one, the tempter. Be at peace and do not pay attention to them.

On "Cheap" Love

Cheap love always aims at self interest. Since this love is limited, the Christian who lives it sets as a boundary the point where he does not fall into sin --- so as to enjoy the things of the world. For example, he eats until midnight (five minutes to twelve) on the last day before beginning of Great Lent; and wants to indulge in every worldly joy up to the point where he does not fall into sin. And then, he demands to know why he does not feel God’s love within him, etc. (within his cheap love).