

Saint Paul's Women's Bible Study
Fourth Sunday of Lent
Feast of St. John the Ladder

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Come, let us work in the mystical vineyard of Christ,

bearing fruits of repentance within it.

Let us not labor for the sake of food and drink,

but through prayer and fasting let us attain to Christ-like
virtues. And the Lord of the vineyard, pleased by our labor,
will grant and reward, redeeming our souls from sin,
for He alone shows steadfast love towards people.

Lord, we praise You, we glorify You,
and we give thanks to You forever! Amen. †

Adapted Hymn of Praise - Fourth Sunday of Lent

God's Faithfulness

The theme of FAITHFULNESS is highlighted by the hymns and reading of the Fourth Sunday of Lent. The above hymn echoes Jesus' teachings: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (Jn. 6:27, RSV). The Epistle reading, Heb. 6:13-20, tells us that God's promise to bless all the nations is absolutely reliable. The Gospel reading, Mk. 9:17-31, dramatically points up the necessity of faith on man's part in order to receive God's blessing. Finally the example of St. John of the Ladder is lifted up in order to show us that our faithfulness to God is expressed through repentance, prayer, fasting, and the practice of Christian virtues leading to a paschal renewal. (That's what Lent is all about!)

What was God's promise? When Abraham had shown his faith in God by his willingness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14), God made a solemn vow to bless Abraham. The Epistle to the Hebrews quotes God's promise to Abraham: "I promise you that I will bless you and give you many descendants" (Heb. 6:14; see also Gen. 22:17). This promise was fulfilled in the phenomenal rise of the Jewish nation in the history of salvation. In addition to the growth of the Jewish nation, however, the New Testament writers also found a spiritual meaning in this promise of God to bless all the nations. St. Paul calls Abraham "the spiritual father of us all" (that is, both Jews and Gentiles, (Rm 4:11-12,16, p. 390). For St. Paul "the blessing which God promised to Abraham [was] given to the Gentiles by means of Christ Jesus, so that through faith we might receive the Spirit promised by God" (Gal 3:14).

Read Heb. 6:13-20 (p. 561), the Epistle reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent, a passage entitled "God's Sure Promise." Begin reading with vs. 11, p. 561, for the larger context.

What lesson from the example of God's promise to Abraham is anticipated by the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:12, p. 561)?

We want you to be like those who _____

What did God make through His promise to Abraham? (v 13)

What did God want to make very clear (v 17a)?

What consequences does the spiritual realization of God's promise have for us (v 19a?)

We have this hope _____

Who is the foundation of this hope which is safe and sure (v 20)?

_____, our High Priest in heaven.

Read also Rm 4.13-25 – another passage about God's promise to Abraham

On what was God's promise based and why (v 16)?

It was based on _____ in order that the promise
_____ as God's free gift.

What reasons could have made Abraham doubt God's promise (v 19)?

- a) He was then almost _____
- b) His body was already _____
- c) Sarah could not _____

Of what was Abraham absolutely sure by the power of his faith (v 21)?

Who else is accepted as righteous before God (v 24)?

Everyone who believes in _____

Share other instances in the Bible where God's faithfulness is shown.

Share instances in your life when God's faithfulness to you was experienced.

Help My Unbelief

God loves each of us without conditions. He loves us as we are and seeks to attract us by His love and guide us into His Kingdom. There is nothing that we can do to make God stop loving us. That's how God is by nature: "God is love" (1 John 4.8) Therefore, God's faithfulness to each person can be counted upon and is absolutely reliable. God has not only made clear promises to us but He has also fulfilled them without fail and will continue to do so.

However, can the same be said about human faithfulness to God? Although we know about God's faithfulness and may have experienced it personally more than once, nevertheless overwhelming doubt can seize us at critical moments. Typical is the case of the man who brought his epileptic son to Jesus to be healed. Read Mark 9.17-31 the Gospel reading for the Fourth Sunday of Lent.

Who could not cast out the evil spirit (v. 18b)?

What three things did Jesus say about their lack of faith? (v. 19)

How _____ you people are!

How long must I _____

How long do I _____

What did Jesus reply to the man's pleading: "Help us, if you possibly can" (v. 22b)

Everything _____
(v.23).

What is a requirement for healing (v. 29)?

1. Share instances in your life when doubts seemed to overwhelm your personal faith in God.
2. What did you learn from such experiences?

What is Faith?

Faith is an act of trust, an attitude of confidence and an inward decision of reliance on God. Faith activates the power of God in our lives. Through the commitment of faith we enter into a personal relationship with God and become open to the flow of His love. In worship Orthodox Christians are frequently urged to place their lives in the hands of Christ: "Let us commit ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ, our God." In His ministry and teachings Christ often asked for faith.

Look up the following passages and write them below.

Matthew 9.28:

Mark 5.34

John 14.1

John 20.27b

A Saint's Faithfulness

Faithfulness to God is exemplified by the lives of Saints. Saint John, whose feast is celebrated on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, lived in the late 6th and early 7th centuries. Most of his life was spent in complete solitude and unceasing prayer at a place outside of the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai (where he was tonsured as a monk). His was a radical call to uncompromising obedience to the teachings of Jesus. During the last years of his life, Saint John was called to be the abbot of St. Katherine's Monastery. During this time he wrote his famous work, *the Ladder of Divine Ascent*, because of which he came to be known as St. John "of the Ladder" (Klimakos). In this book Saint John offers his wisdom on spiritual and moral perfection through a life in union with God, the summit of the human quest for true life and ultimate fulfillment. Jesus taught His disciples on the Sermon of the Mount: "You must be perfect—just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5.38), a command valid not only for the apostles, nor only for ascetics and monks, but also for all Christians.

What is Christian perfection? Put simply, it is to "live just as Jesus did (1 John 2.6) so that we may "become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature" (Eph 4.13). For us in the world Christian perfection is not the practice of harsh ascetic disciplines in their eternal forms but growth in love, holiness, and goodness – a spiritual ascent through Christ, a Jacob's ladder which brings us to the very presence of God (Gen 28.10-22).

Read Matthew 11.27-30. In this prayer of Joy Christ tells us where to seek and find Christian perfection.

What are two of the Son's divine privileges (v. 27b)?

a) the Son _____ the Father.

b) The Son choose to _____ Him to believers.

Whom does Christ invite to come to Him and what is His promise to them? (v. 28)

Come to me _____

and I will _____.

What are Christ's three directives (v. 29)?

a) Take _____

b) Put it _____

c) Learn _____

How does Christ describe His yoke and load (v. 30)?

a) _____ b) _____