

Metropolitan Tikhon Sermon Con't

placing Adam and Eve, our forefathers, in the garden as its caretakers. He fashioned them out of the earth and clothed them with glory, giving them dominion over everything in the garden. He walked through the garden with them, and they spoke to Him, enjoying union with God and perfect communion.

Yet Adam shunned this union with God. He ate the forbidden fruit, disobeying the one commandment God had given him, thereby severing union with God. For his disobedience, he was cast out from the glory of Paradise, no longer able to behold the face of God, but instead condemned to toil and labor for his food and to return to the dust from which he was taken. As our hymns tell us, "Adam sat before the gates of Eden, crying out, Woe to me! No longer can I see my Lord, my God and Creator."

We have all followed the example of Adam in our own sins. Our sinful actions separate us from God, severing the union He desires and causing us to weep bitterly outside the gates of Eden. Our disobedience to His commandments strip us of the robe of grace and cause us to be naked, with only skins and fig leaves to cover us. We, the children of Adam, are likewise condemned to toil and labor, and ultimately to return to the dust from which we were taken. Our sins have closed the gates of Paradise to us, and we are unable to see its beauty and behold the face of God.

But this reality, this separation from God, does not have to stay this way. Our Lord Jesus Christ, in His eternal compassion, desires not the death of us sinners, but rather that we would turn from our wickedness and live. He freely chose to heal our separation, bringing God to man so that man might be brought back to God. He became one of us, a human being, subjecting Himself to everything that we endure, so that He might heal the wound of the serpent and bridge the divide of separation between us and God. He suffered mocking, pain, torture, and ultimately death on the Cross, all so that He might free us from suffering and make our earthly deaths a path to resurrection. He gives us His Holy Body and Precious Blood in the Eucharist, giving us the Bread of Life, with which we are nourished, healed, and granted eternal life. Through Christ, no longer do we return to the dust without hope. He

has reopened the gates of Eden, as He said to the penitent thief on the Cross: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise." He offers us reconciliation with God, returning us to our former beauty, clothing us once again with the robe of grace and allowing us to partake of His Kingdom.

Our path to resurrection, our path back to Paradise, to reconciliation with God, begins with forgiveness. Our Lord tells us today that if we forgive each other, God will also forgive us. Each of us has sinned. Each of us has offended our neighbor. And the path is open to us to reconcile with each other and with God in forgiveness. God is eager to forgive us of each and every sin we commit, but we must also forgive one another of each and every offense we have committed against each other.

Today, we will celebrate Vespers with the Rite of Forgiveness. We have the opportunity to come before each other and ask forgiveness of each other, so that we may all enter into the Great Fast with unity and love. We also have the opportunity to offer forgiveness to each other, fulfilling the commandment of the Lord and turning from our sins against our neighbors.

As we come before each person today, let us put aside all anger, all malice, all envy, and let us forgive and be forgiven. As we will sing at the end of our Lenten journey, on the great and glorious day of Pascha, "Let us call 'brothers' even those that hate us and forgive all by the Resurrection." In our forgiveness, we will unite with our brothers and sisters, and by that union, we will draw near to God. As we turn from our wickedness, our sins, and our divisions, we will be brought back to Paradise and live eternally with our Lord. And as we forgive others, so too God will forgive us of all we have done. In this way, our garment of grace and beauty will be restored and we will be brought to God, glorifying Him throughout the ages: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

LENT
Pray + Fast + Give

Saint Theophylactus, Bishop of Nicomedia

Commemorated on [March 8](#)

Saint Theophylactus lived at Constantinople in the eighth century during the time of the Iconoclast heresy. After the death of the iconoclast emperor Leo IV the Khazar (775-780), Emperor Constantine VI (780-797) ascended the throne. At the same time, the holy Patriarch Paul (August 30), not having the strength to continue guiding the flock in the face of iconoclasm, voluntarily resigned his office (784). Saint Tarasius (February 25) was chosen in his place. At that time, he was an eminent imperial counselor. Under the supervision of the new Patriarch the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) was convened to condemn the Iconoclast heresy. A relatively peaceful time began for the Church, and monasteries again began to fill with monks.

Saint Theophylactus, a gifted disciple of Saint Tarasius, with the blessing of the Patriarch, went to a monastery on the coast of the Black Sea with Saint Michael (May 23). The zealous ascetics by their God-pleasing labors and intense prayer were granted the gift of wonderworking by God. During a drought, when the workers in the field were weakened by thirst, the saints prayed and an empty vessel became filled with enough water to last the entire day.

After several years in the monastery, they were both consecrated as bishops by Patriarch Tarasius. Saint Michael was made Bishop of Synada, and Saint Theophylactus was made Bishop of Nicomedia.

Heading the Church of Nicomedia, Saint Theophylactus cared for the flock entrusted to him. He built churches, hospices, homes for wanderers, he generously distributed alms, was the guardian of orphans, widows and the sick, and personally attended those afflicted with leprosy, not hesitating to wash their wounds.

When the iconoclast Leo the Armenian (813-820) came to the imperial throne, the terrible heresy burst forth with renewed strength.

But the iconoclast emperor was not able to influence Saint Nicephorus (June 2), the successor of Patriarch Tarasius, who with the other bishops vainly urged Leo not to destroy the peace of the

Church. Saint Theophylactus was present at the negotiations of the emperor with the Patriarch. Denouncing the heretics, Saint Theophylactus predicted a speedy death for Leo the Armenian. For his bold prophecy the saint was sent into exile to the fortress Strobil (in Asia Minor). He languished for thirty years until his death, which took place around the year 845.

After the restoration of icon-veneration in the year 847 under the empress Saint Theodora (February 11) and her son Michael, the holy relics of Saint Theophylactus were returned to Nicomedia.

Hebrews 11:24-26, 32-12:2 (*Epistle*)

By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.