

St. Ignatius Branchaninov: Homily on the Sunday of the Paralytic, [On Sin &] Divine Punishment



Fresco of the Healing of the Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda

HOMILY ON THE SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC. ON DIVINE PUNISHMENT

St Ignatius Branchaninov

Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee (Jn. 5:14).

This is the commandment the Lord gave to the paralytic whom He healed, as we heard today in the Gospels.

Beloved brethren! This commandment of the Lord has enormous importance for us. It teaches us that we are subjected to sickness and other catastrophes of this earthly life for our sins. When God delivers us from sickness or catastrophe but we return to a sinful life, we are again consigned to catastrophes that are more onerous than those which were our first punishments sent from God to

bring us to our senses.

Sin is the cause of all man's sorrows, both in time and in eternity. Sorrows are the natural consequence, the natural property of sin, just as sufferings, produced by physical illnesses, are the unavoidable property of these illnesses, and their characteristic effect. Sin in the broad sense of the word could also be called the fall of humankind, or its eternal death, and encompasses all people without exception. Some sins are the sad inheritance of whole human societies. Finally, each person has his own individual passions, his own particular sins he has committed, that belong to him exclusively. Sin, in all these various forms, serves as the beginning of all sorrows and catastrophes to which all mankind is subjected, to which human societies are subjected, and to which each person in particular is subjected.

The state of fallenness, the state of eternal death, by which all mankind is infected and stricken, is the source of all other human sins, both societal and personal. Our widespread sin-poisoned nature has acquired the ability to sin and an inclination toward sin, it has subjected itself to sin, and can neither remove sin from itself, nor do without it in any of its activities. A person who has not been renewed cannot help but sin, although he may not want to sin (Rom. 7:14–23).

There are three punishments determined by God's righteous judgment upon all mankind for the sins it has committed. Two of them have already happened, and one is yet to happen. The first punishment was eternal death, to which all mankind was subjected at its root — its forefathers — for disobedience to God in paradise. The second punishment was the great flood, which occurred because mankind allowed the flesh to overcome the

spirit, and lowered itself to the dignity of irrational beings. The final punishment will be the destruction and end of this visible world for apostasy from the Redeemer, for people's ultimate deviation into communion with fallen angels.

Quite often, a particular kind of sin engulfs whole human societies and brings God's punishment down upon them. Thus the Sodomites were consumed by fire that fell from the sky for their unlawful fleshly pleasure; thus the Israelites were given over more than once to alien tribes for worshiping idols; thus one stone was not left upon the other in magnificent Jerusalem, built of marvelous stones, and its inhabitants perished under the Roman sword for rejecting the Savior, and deicide. Sin is infectious; it is hard for individuals to resist the sin that ensnares entire societies.

In the long sickness of the paralytic healed by the Lord we see an example of punishment for the sins of one individual, who was likewise punished individually by God.

Having said as much as need be known and as much as can now be said about the sinfulness of the entire human race and human societies, let us direct particular attention to the personal sinfulness that every person has of his own. This observation is essentially needed, and essentially useful to us. It can have a saving influence upon what we do, diverting us from the path of lawlessness, and directing us according to God's will. Enlightened by God's law, we learn that God in His unbounded mercy, Who is perfect in the righteousness of His judgment, will unfailingly render due punishment for a sinful life. This conviction incites us to apply all our strength towards freeing ourselves from the bondage to our own passions and the corrupt customs of society, and to deliver ourselves from temporary and eternal Divine

punishments.

The holy fathers[1] say that before the time of their redemption, all people were possessed by sin; they did the will of sin even against their own will. After the redemption of mankind by the God-Man, those who believe in Christ and were made new by holy Baptism are no longer forced by sin, but rather have freedom — freedom either to resist sin, or to follow its suggestions. Those who willingly submit themselves to sin again lose their freedom, and are forcibly overcome by sin.[2] Those who, guided by the Word of God, conduct warfare against sin and resist it, will eventually conquer sinfulness completely. Victory over our own sinfulness is at the same time victory over eternal death. He who obtains it will easily resist the sinful attractions of society. We can see this in the lives of the holy martyrs: having conquered sin in themselves, they withstood the people's error, rebuked it, and did not hesitate to seal their sacred testimony with their blood. A person who is attracted and blinded by his own sin cannot but be attracted by society's sinful mode; he does not look at it clearly, does not understand it as he should, does not renounce it with self denial, and his heart belongs to it. The essence of ascetical striving against sin, the work which every Christian is obligated to do, consists in the struggle against sin, in breaking friendship with it, in the victory over it in one's own soul, mind, and heart, to which the body is bound to be in sympathy. "Eternal death," says St. Macarius the Great, "is hidden in the heart; a person is dead through it, though he outwardly lives. He who has gone from death to life in the secret recesses of his heart will live for ages, and will never die. Although the bodies of such people may depart for a time from their souls, they are *sanctified*, and will arise with glory. For this reason, we call the death of the saints "sleep." [3]

All the saints without exception (Heb. 12:8), regardless of their victory over eternal death and revelation of eternal life within themselves even during this temporal life, were subjected to many and difficult sorrows and temptations. Why is this? It is the nature of sinners to earn Divine punishment. Why then do God's elect not escape the Divine rod, which strikes them as well? According to the teaching of Holy Scripture and the fathers, this question is resolved in the following way. Although sinfulness has been conquered in righteous people, although eternal death is destroyed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in them, they have not been given immutable goodness that would remain throughout the course of their earthly sojourn; the freedom to choose good or evil has not been taken away from them.[4] Immutable goodness belongs to the future age. Earthly life up until its final hour is a field of voluntary and involuntary ascetical labors. The Great [Apostle] Paul says, *But I keep under* [in Slavonic, "mortify] *my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway* (1 Cor. 9:27). The Apostle says this of a body salted and sanctified by Divine grace, a body uninjured by cruel venom, whose clothes produced healings. Even that body required enslavement and mortification, so that its mortified passions might not be revived and eternal death not be resurrected! Though he be a vessel of the Holy Spirit, eternal death can be resurrected in a Christian for as long as he wanders the earth, and sinfulness can again encompass his soul and body. But the podvig[5] alone of the servants of God is not enough to mortify the fallenness β which nests in a nature that continually strives to regain its dominion; they need help from God. God helps them with His grace and fatherly punishing rod according to each one's grace. The great [Apostle] Paul was given, as he testifies, *a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me,*

lest I should be exalted above measure (2 Cor. 12:7)[6] — because of his exalted spiritual progress, because of the many Divine revelations granted to him, because of the many spiritual gifts that he had, and because of the many miracles that he performed. Our nature is so injured by sinful poison that the abundance of God's grace itself in a person can serve as the cause of his pride and destruction. St. Paul met neither honor, nor glory, nor unquestioning obedience when he preached Christ to the universe, even proving the truth of his preaching through signs; an angel of satan set his traps everywhere — resistance, humiliation, persecution, attacks, and death. Knowing that this all happens as God allows it to do, St. Paul exclaims, *Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake* (2 Cor. 12:10). St. Paul found it necessary to mortify his body, so that from a relaxed body fleshly passions would not arise; while the eye of God's Providence saw the need to guard his soul from pride through sorrows. The purest human nature has something of pride in it, as St. Macarius the Great noticed.[7] For this reason, slaves of God subject themselves to voluntary deprivations and sorrows — at the same time, God's Providence allows various sorrows and temptations to come upon them, supplementing the podvigs of His servants and preserving their podvig from the corruption of sin through sorrows. The path of earthly life has always been laborious, thorny, full of depravations, and laden with countless misfortunes. *Some, says the Apostle Paul, were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, 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 in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth (Heb. 11:35–38).

Blessed Symeon Metaphrastes notes in the life of Great Martyr Eustathius: “It is not pleasing to God that His servants, for whom he has prepared eternal, permanent glory and honor in heaven, should abide as honored and glorified with vain and temporary honor in this transitory and unstable world.”[8] Why is this? Because no man is able to abide at the heights of earthly magnificence and well-being without harm to his soul. Even one who is equal to the angels in his morality would be shaken.[9] In us, in our souls, is planted through our fall the potential to revert. [10] We cannot help but conform our spirit’s inclinations to our outward, material circumstances. *My soul hath cleaved to the earth;* (Ps. 118:25;) confesses the prophet to God for every fallen person. Thy right hand, he says, “Thy all-holy Word, and Thy all-holy Providence lifts me from the earth, wrenches me from it, and leads me to salvation, dissolving my temporary well-being with sorrows, but consoling me with grace-filled consolations that breathe into my heart a yearning for heaven. Without this help from God, with my wretched inclinations against which I cannot stand by my own powers alone, I would cling in mind and heart to the material world, and would terribly, fatally deceive myself, forgetting about eternity, about the blessedness prepared for me in it, irrevocably losing it.”

The true servants of God accepted with submissiveness to God, with thankfulness, and glorifying God, all the sorrows that God’s Providence allowed to befall them. They accepted it willingly, as the Apostle Paul says, and were well-disposed towards their sorrows. They found them profitable, needful, necessary for themselves; they considered them to be correctly allowed, and

beneficial. They united the yearning of their own will to the manifestation of God's will; in the exact sense, they were well-disposed toward punishments and correction sent to them from God.

From just such a disposition of heart, from this kind of thinking did the saints look upon the catastrophes that befell them. Spiritual consolation and rejoicing, renewal of spirit, and a perception of the future age were the results of the disposition inspired by humility of mind. What will we sinners say of the sorrows that greet us? What, first of all, is their initial cause? The initial cause of human suffering, as we see, is sin; and any sinner does well who quickly turns his inner gaze towards his own sins when sorrows befall him, and accuses his sins, accuses himself for his sins, and accepts the affliction as God's just punishment. There is another reason for sorrows: the mercy of God toward feeble humans. By allowing sorrows to come upon sinners, God encourages them to come to their senses, to halt their uncontrollable longings, to remember eternity and their relationship to it, to remember God and their obligations to Him. Sorrows that are allowed to befall sinners serve as a sign that these sinners are not yet forgotten, not rejected by God, that their ability to repent, correct themselves, and find salvation is still being evaluated.

Sinners punished by God, take heart; For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth (Heb. 12:6). Holy Scripture tells us this, instructing, consoling, and strengthening us. *Lay hold of instruction, lest at any time the Lord be angry, and ye perish from the righteous way* (Ps. 2:12); accept punishment with the awareness that you are deserving of punishment; accept punishment, glorifying the merciful God,

Who is just in His righteous judgment; accept punishment with a dispassionate evaluation of the life you have lived, with confession of the sins you have committed, with cleansing of your sins by tears of repentance, and correction of your behavior. Often we need little outward correction, but very much correction secretly: correction of our kind of thinking, inclinations, motives, and intentions. You have diverged from the righteous path by your sins; do not lose it entirely by murmuring, by justifying yourself against your conscience before people, by hopelessness, despair, and blasphemy against God. Do not turn the means given to you, the means which the Lord Himself uses to redirect you to the path of piety, into a way to become completely undone, to wreak your own demise. Otherwise the Lord will be angry with you. He will turn His face from you as from something alien to Him; He will withhold sorrows from you as from one forgotten and rejected (cf. Heb. 12:8); He will allow you to spend your earthly life in the lusts of your sin-loving heart, and will command death to cut you down unexpected, and you will be like the tares which made themselves the property of the fires of gehenna by their own free will.

He who endures well all the temptations allowed by God comes closer to God, acquires boldness before Him, becomes familiar to Him, as the Apostle testifies: *If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons* (Heb. 12:7). God fills with spiritual blessings the one who endures sorrows with humbleness of spirit, hears his heartfelt prayers, and often turns back the whip and rod of chastisement if it is no longer needed for greater spiritual progress. This is what happened at the healing of the paralytic, who lay for thirty-eight years at Solomon's gate amongst a crowd of many other sick people who waited, like the paralytic, for the vivifying movement of the waters at the hand of the angel. Such a miserable condition is involuntary sickness and poverty! It is

obvious that those sick people had no means to pay for doctors, and therefore they resolved to wait a long time for the miracle which occurred once a year, which brought sure and complete healing from any illness — but only to one sufferer. The sickness of the paralytic was punishment for sins, as is clear from the condition the Lord gave to the one He healed: *Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee* (Jn. 5:14).

The Who Lord gave the paralytic this commandment, so that he would not fall again into the same sins for which he had been punished through illness, gave the same commandment to the sinful woman when He forgave her sins. *Go*, said the Savior of the world to a person whom the righteous of the earth had sentenced to stoning, *and sin no more* (Jn. 8:11). Healing of soul and healing of body is given by the merciful Lord under one condition — the same condition. The woman's sin was a mortal sin; apparently the paralytic's sin also belonged to the category of mortal sins. These are the kind sins that most often call down God's punishment. The one who has sunk into the abyss of mortal sins needs particular help from God — this help is manifested openly in punishment, and secretly in the call to repentance. A person is called to repentance either by sickness, as was the paralytic, or by persecutions from people, as was David, or by some other method. No matter what form God's chastisement takes, we should accept it with humility, and hasten to satisfy that Divine aim with which the punishment was sent: to have recourse to the cure which is repentance, having embraced within our souls the commandment to abstain from the sin for which the Lord's hand chastises us. Our own conscience will assuredly point out that sin to us. Forgiveness of the sin and deliverance from the affliction by which we are punished for the sin is granted to us from God, only under the

condition that we abandon the sin so destructive to us, and so hateful to God.

A return to the sin that brought God's wrath down upon us, the sin that was healed and forgiven by God, is the cause of great catastrophes, most of which are eternal, beyond the grave. The paralytic languished thirty-eight years for his sin. It is a significant punishment! However, the Lord pronounces an even greater punishment for returning to sin. What punishment could be more onerous than the one which restrained the sick man all his life on his bed, amidst such depravations? Nothing other than the eternal torment in hell which awaits all unrepentant and incorrigible sinners. Amen.

St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov) Translated by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

15 / 05 / 2011 [

1] Abba Dorotheus, homily 1.

[2] "Blagovestnik"; Mt. 12:44-45.

[3] Homily 1, chap. 2.

[4] St. Macarius the Great, Homily 7, chap. 4. St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 1.

[5] Podvig is the untranslatable word denoting especial ascetical labor, effort, struggle.

[6] The entire passage reads, And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. —Trans.

[7] Homily 7, chap. 4.

[8] Menaion, September 20.

[9] St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 1. [10] Ibid.

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