

Providence and the Good God

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How do you see the world? Is it deeply troubled, teetering on the brink of disaster? Are dark forces lurking, quietly undermining even the possibility of doing good?

There is much talk, here and there, about the nature of the “Orthodox mind.” Whether it is discussed under the heading of “acquiring an Orthodox phronema” (which can be very off-putting for some), or simply coming to understand what constitutes an Orthodox worldview, the conversation is important. St. Paul says this:

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2)

This apostolic admonition makes it clear that there is a gulf between us and the “world.” St. John uses even stronger language:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” (1 John 2:15-17).

Obviously, St. John and St. Paul have a common meaning for “world” in these passages. That meaning is not the same as the use of the word in St. John’s gospel, “For God so loved the world.” That “world” is a collective that describes the whole of creation. The other use is a term meant to describe the collective “mind” of sin and death that permeates so much of the culture around us – that is – how people think and behave when their life is alienated from the commandments of Christ.

Both apostles, however, are not governed by this concern, nor is it their take on how to see what is going on. News was largely word-of-mouth and only occasional. They did not have a “big picture” in our modern sense of the phrase. St. Paul urges prayer for the emperor and even defends the authority of the emperor, with no particular foresight that the very authority he defended would, in the end, demand his head. (Even had he known, he would have said the same thing).

What we find in both, however, is clear evidence of the “mind of Christ” (an “Orthodox phronema”). Later theology would come to describe that phronema under the heading of “providence.” St. Paul writes:

“...we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” (Rom. 8:28)

That peaceful confidence is echoed throughout his writings. He can say:

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31–39)

This same unbounded confidence is echoed throughout the Orthodox tradition. The Morning Prayer of the Elders of Optina gives a good example. It reads, in part:

“O Lord, grant that I may meet all that this coming day brings to me with spiritual tranquility. Grant that I may fully surrender myself to Thy holy Will. At every hour of this day, direct and support me in all things. Whatsoever news may reach me in the course of the day, teach me to accept it with a calm soul and the firm conviction that all is subject to Thy holy Will.”

Though neither St. Paul nor St. John could see the “big picture” of their current events, their larger picture (the true big picture) was governed by *one* thing – they knew that *God is good* and that He is at work *in all things*, everywhere, and at all times, for our good. This is true despite every action and form of evil. What our adversary means for our destruction, God means for our good (as we see in the Biblical story of Joseph the Patriarch).

This is the foundation of an Orthodox mind. Without it, there will be little faith, much anxiety, and a spiritual life that is tossed “to and fro” from every side. Christ told His disciples that they would be persecuted. He told them, however, to give no thought to what they might say when that moment came, promising that words would be given them at that time. (Matt. 10:19) He rebuffed their every effort to get from Him information about “when,” “where,” and “how.”

I agree with the observation that we live in troubled times. In point of fact, the Church has *always* lived in troubled times. There have been no ideal centuries for Orthodoxy. “Holy Byzantium” and “Holy Russia” are far more products of our imagination than of actual history. Emperors and Tsars have been among our greatest persecutors. However, the “times” in which we live is not a concern of the Orthodox mind. Even atheists are capable of worrying about the state of the world.

Do you believe that “all is subject to Thy holy will?” Do you believe that God is good? Do you believe that He is working in all things both for your good and the good of the whole world? That primary goodness is the “sacrament” of which the world is the manifestation. Each day and every moment of the day, we are invited to eat and drink the goodness of God with which He feeds us. This is the heart of an Orthodox mind. St. Paul again gives this commandment:

“Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” (Eph 5:17–20)

Acquiring this mind is not easy at first. It requires prayer and fasting (including fasting from worldly news and worries). It requires that we guard our hearts from temptation. It requires the slow and patient understanding that can only come from “theoria,” the contemplation of the goodness of God in all things.

Jesus, like Jonah, was asleep in the boat during the storm. That is the mind of Christ.