***3 13 16 THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK***

***“Brethren, salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand.”***

On this Sunday of Cheesefare, on the eve of the Great Lenten Fast, we hear St. Paul’s admonition that now is the time of our salvation. Salvation has so many different meanings for those who call themselves Christians, therefore it is very important for us to understand what salvation is. For us, as Orthodox Christians, salvation is living our life in intimate union with our Lord Jesus Christ. This union comes to us first through the Mysteries of the Church. In Baptism, we die with Him and rise with Him. In Confession we are cleansed and forgiven. In the Holy Eucharist we receive His very life. This union is accomplished and given to us by the free grace of God. But we cannot receive this grace in vain. If we are to receive this grace and life from God, we must simultaneously place our lives in His hands. That is, as we conform our words, thoughts, and deeds to our Lord’s commandments, we open the door of our hearts so that He can come and dwell in us, and give us the power to, indeed, keep His commandments. Keeping the commandments is an expression of the very love of God and love must involve our free will. Without the free will of both the Lover and the beloved, true love cannot exist- and it is Love Himself that is our salvation. Our Lord tells us this explicitly in the Gospel of John- "***If you love Me, keep My commandments. "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever-- "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (Joh 14:15-17 NKJ)*** This is the intimate and organic union that constitutes our salvation.

Therefore beloved, we must strive to keep the commandments of God as an expression of our love and life in union with our Lord. Finally, if we are to keep His commandments- we must wake up from sleep. The blessed Paul tells us, ***"Awake, you who sleep, Arise from the dead, And Christ will give you light." See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise. (Eph 5:14-15 NKJ)*** Here we have the real meaning of Great Lent and, indeed, of all of the Orthodox ascetic life. It is waking up of our souls so that we can see and walk in the spiritual reality; so that we can experience and live a resurrected life. This is the whole purpose of intensifying our prayer life, this is why we fast, and this is why we sacrifice our own possessions and lives to give to others. It is pride and self-centeredness that keep us in a dreamlike state- living in this life as if others do not matter. This Great Lent, then, let us direct all of our prayers and fasting, toward this one objective- rising from the sleep of pride, and waking up to the love of God and the love of our neighbor. May our Lord grant each of us to wake up so that we may see the glorious Resurrection of Jesus Christ- Who is our God, Who is our Life and Who is our Salvation. Amen.