

“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2Pet 2:1)

✠ Lecture VII: Things Hard to Understand (Holy Gospel of St. John) ✠

In His second epistle, St. Peter says clearly that there are things “hard to understand” in St. Paul’s writings and also the rest of Holy Scriptures, which those who are “untaught and unstable” twist and misinterpret “to their own destruction”. St. Peter exhorts us to “beware lest we fall from our steadfastness” and to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”.

“Account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, **in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.** You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, **beware** lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but **grow** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”
(2Pet 3:14-18).

✠ Notice the following:

1. Holy Scripture is not always self-explanatory. On the contrary, certain passages are difficult and hard to understand. This is when the Holy Tradition is of major importance.
2. Even though the passages were hard to understand and the people were untaught (i.e. they didn’t know any better), St. Peter clearly said that they twisted the meaning “to their own destruction”. As St. Paul said previously that heretics will not inherit the kingdom of God (**Gal 5:19-21**). So the difficulty of the Holy passages and the ignorance of the heretics are not an excuse for salvation.

The Arians misinterpreted many difficult verses to support their heresy. By the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall provide **a brief**⁺ Traditional Orthodox Interpretation of **some** of these Holy verses:

1. “My Father is greater than I.” (**Jn 14:28**)
2. “I am the true vine, and My Father is vinedresser.” (**Jn 15:1**)
3. “That they may know You the only true God.” (**Jn 17:3**)
4. “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.” (**Jn 20:17**)
5. “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the father do.” (**Jn 5:19**)
6. “The Father who dwells in Me does the works.” (**Jn 14:10**)

One cannot help to marvel about the Arians and Jehovah’s witnesses who quote many verses from the Holy Gospel of St. John, which was written to prove the Divinity of our Lord, in order to deny it. Also, one cannot help to admire our Coptic Orthodox Church that was so powerful in refuting all these claims and was not intimidated by all the doubts that the heretics spread but made the believers read the most controversial verse, “My Father is greater than I” (**Jn 14:28**), everyday in the prayer of the third hour, and “I am ascending to My God and your God” (**Jn 20:17**) in every Resurrection Liturgy.

By the grace of God, we are going to depend mainly on the sayings of the Fathers mentioned in the Nicene and Post Nicene Encyclopedia in addition to several lectures given by H.H. Pope Shenouda III on the same subject in 1994/95 to the students of the theological school in Cairo (tapes are available).

⁺ St Athanasius the Apostolic wrote seven Lectures about (Prov 8:22) and St. Augustine wrote twenty pages on (Jn 5:19).

I) “My Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28)

When our Holy Fathers refuted the Arian misinterpretation of this verse, they provided first the proof of the Divinity and Equality between the Father and the Son (provided in lecture 4: Our Lord Jesus Christ & the Father), and then they discussed **the occasion** during which this verse was said:

“You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father’, for My Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28).

Our Lord said this phrase before going to the garden to be betrayed by Judas, before being arrested by the Jews, before being slapped across the face by one of the officers (Jn 18:22), before being scourged and mocked by the Roman soldiers (Jn 19:1,3), and before carrying His cross to the Golgotha in order to be put to death among the thieves (Jn 19:17-18). Concerning this state it is said about our Lord in the Holy Book of Psalm chapter 22 that depicts His sufferings on the cross, “I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. All those who see Me laugh Me to scorn” (Ps 22:6-7). And Isaiah the Prophet said, “He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men” (Is 53:2-3), “He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth” (Is 53:7).

St. Paul said about our Lord Jesus Christ that He “did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:6,8). **Therefore**, our Lord was referring to this humble servant-form that He assumed in His Incarnation; He is basically saying to His disciples, ‘if you loved Me you would rejoice because I am going to the Father, I am going to My Glory that was covered during My Incarnation. For My Father is greater than this human nature that I assumed’. St. Augustine said that the Holy Spirit is also greater than the Lord Jesus Christ’s servant-form and that He Himself, in the form of God, is greater than Himself.

Moreover, it was said about our Lord Jesus Christ “You made Him little lower than the angels” (Ps 8:5), St. Paul says, “We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9). The Divine Logos who is of the same Godhead of the Father and the Holy Spirit made Himself of no reputation and appeared even lower than the angels that He created. It is no surprise then that He would say to His disciples, ‘Rejoice because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I’ since the Father was not Incarnate but the Divine Logos was.

St. Ambrose said that since no one has seen the Father as it is written, “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (Jn 1:18). Therefore, all the apparitions of God in the Old Testament were apparitions of the Divine Logos. Thus Abraham received the promise of blessing from the Divine Logos who sometimes is called ‘Angel of the Lord’ (Gen 22:15)⁺. This is probably why our Lord said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56), **but** St. Paul said about this promise, “For when God (The Divine Logos) made a promise to Abraham, **because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself**” (Heb 6:13). **Therefore**, “My Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28) does not refer to the Divine Nature or else The Angel of the Lord (Divine Logos) would have sworn by God the Father in (Gen 22:17).

⁺ In the story of Samson, Manoah asked the Angel of the Lord about His name (Judges 13:17). And He replied, “Why do you ask My name, seeing it is Wonderful?” (Judges 13:18) → compare to (Isa 9:6). And Manoah said to his wife, “we shall surely die, because we have seen God!” (Judges 13:22).

II) “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser” (Jn 15:1)

The Arians argued saying, ‘Since He is the vine and the father is the vinedresser, therefore He is not of the same Divine essence as the Father because the nature of the vine is not the same as the nature of the vinedresser. Moreover, it is written, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (Jn 15:5). Therefore, in their view, He is created like us because certainly the vine and the branches share the same nature!!’

✦ Refutation:

Here our Lord is giving an analogy about **the Church** as being His body and the believers as being His members. St. Paul said, “you are the body of Christ, and members individually” (1Cor 12:27), “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1Cor 6:15), “He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body” (Eph 1:22-23). We are not branches of His Divinity, but because He took a human nature like ours, we became His members, “inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14). St. Augustine said, “For as the vine and its branches are of one nature, therefore, His own nature as God being different from ours, He became man, that in Him human nature might be the vine, and we who also are men might become branches thereof.” **Therefore**, our Lord is calling His Human Nature ‘The vine’. **Consequently**, the Father is called ‘The vinedresser’ in the same sense as when He said, “My Father is greater than I” (Jn 14:28). **Moreover**, The Father is called the vinedresser because He is the One who sent the Logos for our salvation, “For God (The Father) so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish” (Jn 3:16). **Also**, the Church is the gift from the Father to the Son. In (Jn 17) our Lord calls the believers “Those You have given Me” seven times; in this sense the Father is called the vinedresser.

✦ Notice the following:

1. In the parable of the fig tree (Lk 13:6-9), the keeper wanted to dig around and fertilize the tree itself in order to bring fruit. But our Lord said concerning the vine above, “Every branch in Me that does not bears fruit He (The vinedresser/The Father) takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (Jn 15:2). St. John Chrysostom said, “The root requires care rather than the branches, in being dug about, and cleared, yet about this He says nothing here, but all about the branches. **Showing that He is sufficient to Himself**, and that the disciples need much help from the vinedresser.”
2. Our Lord said, “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (Jn 15:3). St. John Chrysostom said, “See how He introduces Himself as tending the branches? ‘I have cleansed you’, He says; yet above He declares that the Father does this. But there is no separation between the Father and the Son”. St. Augustine said, “For just to keep any from supposing that the branch can bear at least some little fruit of itself, His next words are, “without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). For although, when a branch bears little fruit, the vinedresser prunes it that it may bring forth more; yet if it abides not in the vine, and draws its life from the root, it can bear no fruit whatsoever of itself. **And although Christ would not have been the vine had He not been man, yet He could not have supplied such grace to the branches had He not also been God.**”

✦ Conclusion:

The analogy of the vine, the vinedresser, and the branches is not about the divine relation between the Father and the Son but it is about our relation with the Father and the Son in the Church. When the words of our Lord are examined closely we conclude that both the Father and the Son tend to the Church but we are called members of our Lord Jesus Christ because He shared our nature in His Incarnation.

III) “That they may know You the only true God” (Jn 17:3)

The Arians claim that in the above verse our Lord Jesus Christ is declaring that **only** the Father is God.

✠ The word GOD can refer to:

1. **God the Father:** “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” (**Jn 3:16**)
2. **The Holy Trinity:** “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (**Gen 1:1**). This verse refers to the Holy Trinity because concerning the Son it was said, “All things were made through Him” (**Jn 1:3**). And concerning the Holy Spirit it was said, “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created” (**Ps 104:30**).

✠ The words ONLY & ALONE don’t mean exclusion:

1. It was said about God the Father, “who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see” (**1Tim 6:16**). Does this verse mean that the Son, about whom it was said, “in Him was life” (**Jn 1:4**), doesn’t have immortality? Or does this verse exclude the Holy Spirit from immortality? Of course not.
2. It was said about our Lord Jesus Christ, “nor there is salvation in any other” (**Acts 4:12**). It is inconceivable that this verse would mean excluding the Father and the Holy Spirit from our salvation. → (**Mt 28:19**).

✠ Conclusion:

Our Lord was talking about the Oneness of God and He was referring to the Godhead including Himself and the Holy Spirit. Notice that He said, “That they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (**Jn 17:3**). But who is our Lord Jesus Christ whom the Father sent? He is the Logos, He is the wisdom of God, and He is God Incarnate.

IV) “I am ascending to My father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (Jn 20:17)

✠ St. Augustine said:

“He says not, **Our** Father in one sense, therefore, is He mine, in another sense, yours; by Nature mine, by grace yours⁺. Nor did He say, **Our** God: here, therefore, also is He in one sense Mine, in another yours: My God, under whom I also am as man (**Due to the Incarnation**); your God, between whom and you I am mediator”.

✠ St. John Chrysostom said:

“Is then the Father His in one way and ours in another? Assuredly He is. For if He is God of the righteous in a manner different from that in which He is God of other men, much more in the case of the Son and us. For because He has said, “go to My brethren and say to them” (**Jn 20:17**), in order that they might not imagine any equality from this, He showed the difference. He was about to sit on His Father’s throne, but they to stand by. So although in His existence according to the flesh, He became our Brother, yet in His honor He greatly differed from us, it cannot even be told how much”.

✠ Conclusion:

This verse that the Arians misinterpreted hoping to shake our belief in the Divinity of our Lord is actually a proof and a support of our faith. Moreover, this verse helps us to understand the words that our Lord uttered on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (**Mt 27:46**). The Father is His God in a different sense than ours. This verse shows that the Divinity did not prevent the sufferings of the Human Nature; there is no separation, our Lord meant, “forsaken Me for the pain”.

⁺ Review the difference between our son-ship to the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ’s in lecture IV.

V) “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do” (Jn 5:19)
& VI) “The father who dwells in Me does the works” (Jn 14:10)

The Arians say, The Son is less than the Father, of less authority, of less majesty, and of less ability.

✚ The Occasion of (Jn 5:19):

Our Lord, responding to the Jews’ accusation of breaking the Sabbath, said, “My Father has been working **until now**, and I have been working” (Jn 5:17). As if He was telling them, “When I healed the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, My Father was working through Me at the same time (until now). So if you accuse Me of breaking the Sabbath, you are actually accusing the Father”. It is written, “Therefore, the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath (in their view), but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (Jn 5:18).

At this point He said to them, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do” (Jn 5:19). This He said in order to show **the agreement of the will** between the Son and the Father.

✚ To Be, To See & To Be Able: (From the homilies of St. Augustine. Please read more than once)

“For the Son, both *to be* & *to be able* is the self-same thing. It is not so with man. With man, *to be* & *to be able* are different things. For sometimes the man *is*, and yet *cannot* what he *wills*; sometimes again, the man *is* in such a way that he *can* what he *wills*. Therefore, his *being* and his *being able* are two different things. For if man’s *essence* and his *ability* were the same thing, then he *could* when he *would*. But with God it is not so, that His substance *to be* is one thing, and His power *to be able* another thing; but whatever *is His* and whatever *He is*, is consubstantial with Him, because He is God. It is not so that in one way *He is* and in another way *is able*; He has *the essence* and *the ability* together, because He has *to will* and *to do* together.

Since, then, the power of the Son is of the Father, therefore, also the substance of the Son is of the Father; and since the substance of the Son is of the Father, therefore the power of the Son is of the Father. In the Son, power and substance are not different: the power is the self-same as the substance, the substance *to be*, and the power *to be able*.

✚ Accordingly, because the Son is of the Father, He said, “The Son can do nothing of Himself”. Because He is not Son from Himself, therefore He is not able from Himself.

✚ Therefore, this, “The Son can do nothing of Himself”, would mean the same thing as if He were to say, “The Son is not of Himself”. For if He is a Son, He was begotten; if begotten, He is from Him of whom He is begotten.

✚ Nevertheless, the father begat Him equal to Himself. Someone might ask, ‘How has eternal begat eternal?’ As a temporary flame generates a temporary light. The generating flame is contemporary to the generated light; the generating flame does not precede in time the generated light, but from the moment the flame begins, from that moment the light begins. Show me flame without light, and I’ll show you God the Father without Son.

✚ Accordingly, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do”, implies, that for the Son *to see* and *to be begotten* of the father, is the same thing. His *seeing* and His *substance* are not different; nor are His *power* and *substance* different. All that He is, He is of the Father; all that He can is of the Father; because what He can and what He is is one thing, and all of the Father.”

✚ In a Nutshell:

Whatever the Father made, that also the Son made, that also the Holy Spirit made. Moreover, the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is inseparable. Because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not three Gods but One God. → (Gen 1:1; Ps 104:30; Jn 1:10).