

THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1881

OR

Wondrous Is God In His Saints (Ps. 67:35)
— From the Life of St. Parthenius of Chios —
(1805-1883)

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One day, the monks saw Saint Parthenius behind the Monastery of Saint Mark, gazing into the heavens, in an ecstasy like the prophets of ancient Israel. Understanding that he beheld something, they did not disturb him. Afterward, when he came to himself, tears flowed from his eyes like rain as he related that he had seen a black cloud surround and cover the capital of Chios and the mastic country, but not the northern villages. "A great evil shall come," he said. "There will be a great earthquake."

One night some time later, the Saint, very grieved, was praying in the forest. With tears in his eyes he was saying, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." As usual, he had hanging about his neck a large iron cross to remind him, as he said, of his sins.

He heard a tremendous and thunderous voice in the forest—like a lightning bolt, like thunder with human words—while a luminous cross flashed in the sky.

"Parthenius," the voice said, "I shall not hide from you that Chios, your homeland, will be destroyed. A dreadful earthquake will convulse it. Nothing shall remain standing, and nothing shall change My will which I have not concealed from My servant."

From that hour Saint Parthenius began to forewarn those pilgrims who came to the monastery that there would be an earthquake. Later, God revealed to him that it would happen at one in the afternoon on Sunday, March 22, the feast day of Saint Basil, Bishop of Ancyra. The Saint was foretelling this from September of 1880. Everyone was aroused and felt with fear that the time was drawing near, even though March was still a long way off.

"I am telling you this," the Saint said, "so that you may repent, and also take precautions for that day. Before the March earthquake, there will be a small earthquake. Do not fear the first one. The great one, the earthquake

of March, will make us all weep." These were the words he spoke to the pilgrims.

All the inhabitants of the island knew about the prophecy, or rather, they were terrified by it. The Turkish governor observing this (he was not the same one whose wife was healed by the prayers of the Saint), exiled the Saint to Smyrna because of this prophecy*. As the Saint was boarding the boat for his exile, he turned around and said to the Christians who were weeping inconsolably, "Do not weep. They will quickly bring me back. The governor is exiling me, so I will not be here for the first earthquake. Do not fear the first earthquake, which will occur now. Fear the earthquake of March." Before the boat arrived in Smyrna, his place of exile, Chios started to quake. But all trusted the Saint's words. It was still September. The Saint had said all the disaster and destruction would happen in the earthquake of March. So they did not fear yet.

The people rose up almost as in revolt, and they petitioned that the sanctified monk be returned to Chios. The governor yielded to the request of all the people and recalled the Saint from exile. However the news of these things had already spread throughout Smyrna. "A certain monk in Chios," they said, "prophesied that there will be a great earthquake on Chios in March, but a small one first. The Turkish governor exiled him here, but the first earthquake of which he spoke occurred before he arrived, just as he said. Now the one in March will occur too." The Bishop of Smyrna learned of it as well.

It was the day his exile had been rescinded following the first small earthquake, which had verified the Saint's prediction, and the righteous man was preparing to go to Chios. But the Bishop of Smyrna said, "It doesn't matter. Bring him here so I may see what kind of man he is of whom I have heard so much." When the Saint went to the Bishop, the Bishop asked him, "Why did they send you here?"

"Because I was headstrong," the Saint answered with humility.

After they had visited for a little while, the Bishop came to understand the greatness of this righteous man, and Saint Parthenius was returned to Chios.

Thousands were waiting for the Saint at the port of Chios. They had lived through the first earthquake which occurred when he was sent into exile. Realizing that the Saint's prediction of the earthquake confirmed the

* Chios and the Aegean Islands were not liberated from the Turks until 1912. Apparently, the Turkish governor thought that the Saint was just a rabble-rouser.

truthfulness of his words, they received him with tears in their eyes and did not dare to gaze upon him. He returned triumphant as a victor, as a saint. But he bowed his head in humility, believing the victory was God's, and that the glory belonged to God alone. As he passed by, some would make the sign of the cross while others knelt.

The Saint had prophesied that the great earthquake would occur in March, 1881. The months passed after his exile, and March was drawing near. Knowledge of the prophecy had spread to all of Chios. There was not even one small child left who did not know of it. During the final days everyone was drawn to the mountains, for many unshakably believed the Saint's word. The Saint also gathered many for shelter in his monastery.

On March 22, 1881, at precisely one in the afternoon, exactly as predicted, the ground in Chios began to quake. Wind whistled through the trees. Walls fell as if they were made of paper; and from within the heaps of ruins, heart-rending cries of anguish were heard. Here and there chasms opened in the earth, and those who had fled to the open fields disappeared into them. The righteous Parthenius was praying with tears in his eyes, "O Lord, turn Thy wrath away from us..." The earth quaked beneath his feet and he himself was unable to stand, "Turn away Thy wrath, O Lord..."

It was not long before all of Chios had become an endless cemetery. There were only ruins, and corpses, and the living bewailing their beloved ones. Many said that Chios had suffered a worse catastrophe from the earthquake than from the Turkish massacre of 1822. Yet the righteous Parthenius had been warning all the people since September, 1880, that is, for a period of five months before the earthquake.

After the great earthquake of March 1881, when everyone was trying to salvage what was left of his household, thousands of people were drawn to Saint Mark's because the Saint's words had been shown to be true. As many as were saved by his prophecy went to thank and venerate him—to venerate as a living saint, him that had been made worthy by God to proclaim beforehand events they saw fulfilled before their very eyes.

Immediately they began to ask for his rassa and prayer ropes so they could bless the sick with them for their healing. Again, other simple Chians of that time, out of their reverence for the person of the righteous Parthenius, watched carefully where he would step so that they might take the earth and keep it as a safeguard and blessing.*

* See Acts 5:15 and 19:12

The earthquake of Chios was one of the worst Greece suffered in modern times. The toll of the great earthquake was a total of 4,869 casualties: 3,558 dead and 1,311 injured. Hardest hit were the villages of the fertile plains, Kalimassiá, Muddy River, Cataracts, Nénita, Exo Didíma, and the capital city, Chios.

On the day of the earthquake, one monk from the Saint's monastery, Father Aristides, went down to the city of Chios despite the fact that the righteous Parthenius forbade him. "Do not go," he said, "something very bad will happen." But he disobeyed. Before the disobedient monk could take care to protect himself, he had fallen to the ground covered with blood. A rock had hit him on the head, and he was mortally wounded by this stroke. As the blood was running out of his ears, he heard the voice of the Saint, who was so many miles away saying, "Oh, Aristides, Aristides, why didn't you listen?" In a short while, Father Aristides was dead and they brought him to Saint Mark's to bury him. The Saint was waiting for the monk's corpse at the entrance of the monastery. He forgave him his disobedience, and the funeral for reposed monks was served. The disobedient monk, forgiven by the righteous man after his tragedy, was buried in the monastery cemetery in order to teach the monks that "disobedience is death."

Contrary to the disaster of Father Aristides, Father Christopher showed that while disobedience is death, obedience is life. Father Christopher Seremelis was present at that same Sunday morning service, after which the righteous Parthenius said that the earthquake would be at midday. Then he told Father Christopher, "Father Christopher, on the road going down, you will meet women grinding coffee. They will invite you to drink some, but do not accept." Father Christopher met the women and they invited him. He quickly answered that he was in a hurry. As soon as he returned to his cell, the earthquake began. Thus he was able to flee to the field, while the women who were grinding coffee were killed.*

This earthquake, which was reported in the April 30, 1881 edition of The London Illustrated News, measured 6.5 on the Richter scale and was every bit as disastrous as the Life records. Amid the destruction, many bodies were left unburied, spreading disease to the survivors. When Turkish troops arrived to secure the island they had difficulty entering the harbor because it was filled with floating corpses. Other bands of Turks harassed the survivors and went around looting. Under the dire circumstances many hundreds of Chians were forced to flee to other islands.

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People like Saint Parthenius are the true theologians of the Church — or as Saint Gregory the Theologian puts it: "Who is the man that can speak concerning things divine?" ("Tis o theologón ánthropos?") — and he goes on to explain that it is only he whose "eyes" have been enlightened by divine grace.

Potentially, this means that every believing Orthodox Christian can become a theologian free of charge, without even having to pay the tuition needed to get through a seminary.

The saintly elders, Joseph the Cave-dweller of the Holy Mountain and Father Justin Popovich of Serbia, taught that if one has not read the Lives of the Saints from end to end, then that person has not yet completed the elementary school of a Christian education.

If we read the Lives of the Saints, we will learn how all of us can become theologians in the true sense.