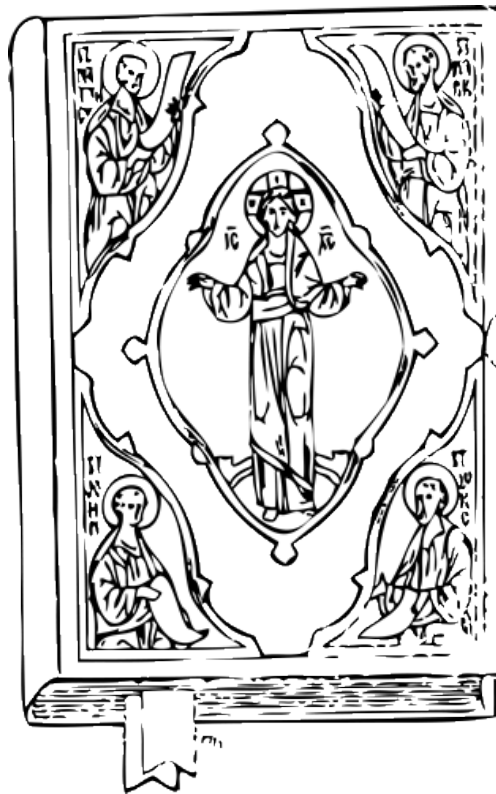




2019  
YOUTH SPIRITUAL COMPETITION



*Junior High Level*

BIBLE Study

# THE Psalms

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# I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

Considering all of the books in the Bible, the book of Psalms is one of the most unique. St. Athanasius described it as a garden, saying that, while every book in the Bible has its own particular fruit, the Psalms has fruit from all over the Bible, including its own special fruit. St. Athanasius described the Psalms as a mirror. Just like one sees a reflection of himself in a mirror, we see a reflection of ourselves in the Psalms. We read other books in the Bible and see examples of the prayers of holy men and their actions. However, in the Psalms, it is as if the words written there are our own. As we look throughout the Psalms, we find many different songs for many different occasions. Some Psalms are for thanksgiving. Others are for praise. There are some for when we want to repent. There are Psalms that we pray when we are distressed. There are even Psalms that we pray on the way to church.

As the book of Psalms is a garden that contains the fruit of many other books in the Bible, we find images of Christ hidden throughout. St. John Chrysostom explains that the Psalms spoke in a mysterious way about Christ so that the Jews would not reject them. In Luke 24:44, the Lord shared with His Apostles that the Psalms spoke about Him. Throughout the New Testament, the Apostles made appeals to the Psalms to show everyone that Jesus is the Messiah and the Savior.

The Psalms is the book of worship for the Church, by which the Holy Spirit spoke to the Psalmist, the author(s) of the Psalms, to reveal truths about God. St. Basil the Great explained that God, as an intelligent doctor who gives his patient honey with medicine to mask its bitter taste so the patient may be healed, the Holy Spirit inspired the Psalmist to mix beautiful melodies with theological<sup>1</sup> truths so our souls may be healed. St. Basil explains that people would recite the Psalms like music, but would have on their minds the attributes of God. They would sing about His love, mercy, protection, goodwill, and faithfulness to mankind.

We will begin with an introduction to the book of Psalms. We will then see the transition of the Psalms from the Old to the New Testament. After this, we will study different methods to analyze Psalms so we could learn how to pray. Finally, we will discuss what the Psalms teach us about Christ.

## A. NAME AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The name “Psalms” is taken from the Greek *Psalmos*. In the New Testament, there are two instances where the full title of the book is used. The first was in Luke 20:42 after the Lord responded to the arguments presented by the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Luke writes:

And He said to them, “How can they say that the Christ is the Son of David? Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms:

“The Lord said to my Lord,  
‘Sit at My right hand,  
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’”  
Therefore David calls Him “Lord;” how is He then David’s Son?

The other instances was in Acts 1:20 when St. Peter the Apostle spoke regarding the betrayal of Judas and the need to replace him.

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1. By theological, we mean relating to God



For it is written in the Book of Psalms:  
'Let his dwelling place be desolate,  
And let no one live in it'; and,  
'Let another take his office.'<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Psalms is divided into five books or sections. Book I is Psalms 1-41; Book II is Psalms 42-72; Book III is Psalms 73-89; Book IV is Psalms 90-106; and Book V is Psalms 107-151.<sup>3</sup>

The Septuagint provides insights as to the collection of the Book of Psalms as well as its authorship, authority, and canonization.<sup>4</sup> In 2 Maccabees 2:13 we read, "The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and gathered books about the kings and the prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings," which clearly indicates that Nehemiah collected the books of Psalms in the library of the Temple under the designation, "the writings of David."

## **B. AUTHORSHIP OF THE PSALMS**

Traditionally, the Church attributes the Book of Psalms to David the Prophet. However, many of the Psalms were written by many different people. Besides King David, the Church recognizes that Psalms were authored by Solomon, the sons of Korah,<sup>5</sup> Asaph,<sup>6</sup> Heman the Ezrahite,<sup>7</sup> Moses, Aggeus and Zacharias,<sup>8</sup> the "Poor Man,"<sup>9</sup> as well as anonymous authors.<sup>10</sup>

## **C. NUMBERING OF THE PSALMS**

While the Psalms were written originally in Hebrew, they were also translated into Greek for the early Jews living outside of Israel. This Greek text, called the Septuagint, became that which were read by the earliest Christians, since the Jews and Gentiles outside of Israel mostly read and spoke Greek. So, the Early Church mainly prayed with the Greek Psalms. There are two major differences between the Hebrew and the Greek Psalms: (1) a difference in numbering, and (2) the addition of Psalm 151 in the Greek.

Due to a difference in the division of the Psalms, there is a difference in numbering between the Hebrew and Greek Psalms. The Hebrew Psalms 9 and 10 are combined into the Greek Psalm 9, and the Hebrew Psalm 147 is divided into the Greek Psalms 146 and 147. Psalms 114 and 115 in Hebrew are combined into Psalm 113 in the Greek. Psalm 116 in the Hebrew is divided into Psalms 114 and 115 in the Greek. Besides

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2. This is read on Covenant Thursday, the Praxis or Acts reading during Matins

3. See Appendix 1.1 for a graphic showing the five books of Psalms.

4. Canonization is the process by which the Church officially accepts a book of the Bible.

5. Korah is Moses' cousin. His sons were temple singers.

6. Asaph is one of the three Levites David commissioned to sing in the choir.

7. Heman is another one of the three Levites David commissioned to sing in the choir; he is also the grandson of Samuel the prophet.

8. These are authors noted in select Psalms, see Appendix 1.2.

9. This is the self-given identity of the Psalmist in Psalm 101. See Appendix 1.2.

10. See the Appendix 1.2 for the complete list the Psalms and their respected authors.



these, there is also the addition of Psalm 151 in the Greek. This leads to the Hebrew numbering being “one ahead” of the Greek, while the Greek is “one behind” the Hebrew.<sup>11</sup>

We will use the Greek numbering throughout our discussion unless otherwise noted. When people want to indicate that they are citing from the Greek Septuagint Text, they will abbreviate with LXX (70 in Roman numerals). The Hebrew text is often abbreviated with MT (meaning Masoretic Text). You will find these in many translations of the Bible and commentaries.

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11. See Appendix 1.3 for graphic showing the Psalm numbering





## II. THE USAGE OF THE PSALMS IN JEWISH WORSHIP

The Psalms were not simply written as poetry. Rather, they were intended to be chanted and offered as worship to God. The Children of Israel received these Psalms from the Lord and incorporated them into their worship within the Temple. They had elaborate arrangements of singers and musicians. They also organized the Psalms to be prayed daily within their rites. This section will discuss how the Psalms were used in the Temple. It is important to observe similarities between the Jewish and the Orthodox worship.

### A. ORGANIZATION OF THE TEMPLE CHOIR AND INSTRUMENTS

In the temple, there were singers and musicians. There would be two choirs that would take turns singing verses and choruses. This is similar to our Coptic Orthodox Church, where the two “sides” of the chanters and congregation would alternate verses of hymns. This type of chanting in the Early Church and the Church today, where two choirs (usually in the North and South) would alternate chanting verses (or parts of verses) is called **antiphonal chanting**.

The lead instrument in the Jewish temple was the cymbals.<sup>12</sup> The cymbals would let everyone else know when the prayer of the Psalm was to begin. The cymbals also kept the rhythm, beat, and timing so everyone could pray in unity and harmony. The string section was made up of twelve string lyres,<sup>13</sup> ten string harps<sup>14</sup> that could be played with one hand, and harps tuned an octave lower. The wind section was made up of one-hundred twenty metal trumpets, ram’s horns, and shepherds flutes, which were likely reed pipes.<sup>15</sup> The Holy Bible mentions that the triangle was also used in the temple, while the tambourine was used specifically on feasts and joyous occasions.<sup>16</sup>

In the Coptic Orthodox Church, David’s ten string harp is mentioned in hymns such as *Atai Parthenos* (which is chanted during the Fast of the Virgin Mary) and the melody *Oh Mary* (Which is chanted during the month of Kiahk). Throughout both of these hymns, David plucks each string of his harp in order while praying a Psalm, offering veneration to the Holy Virgin Mary. Psalm 150 also provides a list of instruments used to praise God, such as the trumpet, the harp, the lyre, timbrel, strings, flutes, cymbals, and voices (Ps. 150:3-6).

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12. “Then David and all the house of Israel played music before the Lord on all kinds of instruments of fir wood, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on sistrums, and on cymbals” (2 Samuel 6:5).

13. kithara (κιθάρα). In Coptic this is sometimes referred to as *Psaltirion*, as the Coptic text of Psalm 151.

14. Sometimes these are also called kithara (κιθάρα).

15. Johann Peter Lange, et al. *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical-- Psalms-Song of Solomon* (Zondervan, 1960).

16. “Now it had happened as they were coming home, when David was returning from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women had come out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments” (1 Sam. 18:6).



## **B. OCCASIONS IN WHICH THE PSALMS WERE PRAYED IN THE TEMPLE**

According to the Jewish tradition, the priests would offer up specific Psalms every day. Psalms were also offered at the Tabernacle feasts as well as during the eight days of Hanukkah. Psalms 91, 29, 37, and 69 were prayed to commemorate the Sabbath and remember the sufferings of the people of God. 15 of the Psalms, Psalms 119 through 133, are referred to as the Gradual Psalms, or the **Psalms of the Ascent**,<sup>17</sup> which were prayed on the way to Jerusalem during the three great Jewish feasts (Deu. 16:16).<sup>18</sup> Thus, Psalms were prevalent in the lives of the worshippers through daily recitation, festive and liturgical recitation, and recitation to commemorate days of the week.

Today, the Orthodox Church continues the tradition of praying the Psalms of the Ascents on the way to Church, reciting Psalms 121, 26:4-5, and 64:4.<sup>19</sup>

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17. These have other names as well, such as Gradual Psalms, Songs of Degrees, Songs of Steps or Pilgrim Songs.

18. There are also other opinions of scholars that these 15 psalms were chanted as Levites ascended the 15 steps to minister in the Temple, or that these were the psalms chanted in the dedication of the temple on the 15th of the Jewish month, Tiri.

19. See Appendix 2 for Psalms prayed on the way to Church.



## III. FROM THE TEMPLE TO THE CHURCH

Christ revealed Himself in the Psalms and demonstrated to all His followers that they will learn about Him through praying them. It is here, then, among so many other places, that Christ is the Mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 9:15), uniting Old and New, and fulfilling the prophecy within the Church. Linking these two together in one harmonious relationship, God presents Himself to mankind and mankind worships Him in spirit and in truth.

The Church recognized that She had adopted a wealth of teachings in the books of the Old Testament. The Lord confirmed the importance of the prophecies and types of Christ within the Old Testament that were fulfilled in Him, speaking to His Apostles after His Resurrection, saying, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44). Many of these prophecies and images are included in the Book of Psalms. As *the* book of prayer of the Church, the Psalms are prayer and prophecy; worship and fulfillment.

### A. CHRIST AND THE PSALMS

“Messianic Psalms” Psalms are those which reveal Jesus as the “Messiah” (“Christ” or “anointed one”) Whom God will send to deliver and save His people.

Throughout His ministry, Christ often quoted the Psalms to show how He fulfills the prophecies in the Psalms. There are 28 instances in the Gospels where Christ quoted 16 Psalms. In a similar manner, the Apostles relied on these Psalms throughout their composition of the New Testament books.

### B. THE APOSTLES AND THE PSALMS

The Apostles were no strangers to the Psalms. They, being Jews themselves, had witnessed the prayers and worship in the Temple. What Christ gave to His Apostles, then, was the context by which they may know Christ and worship Him through the prayers of the Psalms. By context, we mean that He showed them that the Psalms were about Him. Before Christ came, the Apostles spent their lives praying the Psalms without knowing that those Psalms revealed Christ. After years of serving with Christ, after witnessing the Resurrection, the Lord “opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Lk. 24:45). The Apostles had found a renewed understanding of the Psalms and a deeper love that surpassed the context provided to them by the Jewish tradition. What they found was that Christ was in the Psalms, and by its prayer He was revealed. They were also granted the grace of the Holy Spirit, Who reminded them and explained to them the things which Christ taught (Jn. 14:26), guiding them into all truth (Jn. 16:13).

After the death of Judas and the Ascension of our Lord (Acts 1:15-26), St. Peter turned to the Psalms, quoting Psalms 68:26<sup>20</sup> and 108:8.<sup>21</sup> He recognized that the Holy Spirit provided David with a prophecy regarding the replacement of Judas. Before that moment, St. Peter and the Apostles were in prayer, and after

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20. “Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it” (Ps. 68:26).

21. “Let another take his office” (Ps. 108:8).



that moment, they once again turned to prayer, asking God to “show which of these two [He had] chosen to take part in the ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place” (Acts 1:24-25). Thus, the Apostles cast lots, which fell to Matthias, and he was added to their number, according to the prophecy of the Psalms.

### **C. MESSIANIC PSALMS IN THE REST OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Throughout the New Testament, Messianic Psalms are used to demonstrate that Christ is the long-awaited Savior. Besides the Gospels and the book of Acts, the Messianic Psalms were used throughout the remainder of the New Testament. St. Paul appeals to the Psalms twice in Romans, once in 1 Corinthians, and twice in Ephesians. There are twelve instances in the book of Hebrews where he also mentions the Psalms to provide evidence regarding the divinity and salvation in Christ. St. Peter quotes Psalm 117:22-23 in his first epistle, and St. John employs the language of Psalm 2:9 in three instances in his book of Revelation.

### **D. THE USE OF THE PSALMS IN THE WORSHIP OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

The Christians inherited within the Psalms a treasure trove of hymns and praises to be offered. On the night of the Last Supper, our Lord offered praise, chanting with His Apostles the “Hallel,” as was the custom of the Passover. The Hallel is comprised of Psalms 113 and 118. The first half of this hymn was sung at the beginning of the Supper while the second half was sung as the Lord and His Apostles made their way to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). Some in the Church recognize this as the turning point at which the Psalms were transferred from the Old to the New Testament. Through Christ’s passover, we pass over from the Law to Grace, and from death to life. The inheritance of the Psalms became our own personal prayers, led by our Lord Jesus Christ, through which we offer Him glory and honor.

The Apostles encouraged the faithful to offer worship through the Psalms at their gatherings. St. Paul promoted the chanting of Psalms in the Church, saying, “Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (1 Cor. 14:26). St. James also encouraged the same, saying, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (James 5:13).



## IV. St. Athanasius' Letter to Marcellinus

### A. INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER

Just like in any other century, the Christians of the fourth century still considered the mystery of the Psalms, mainly the relationship between the Psalms and the rest of Scripture, the meanings of the individual Psalms, and how to Psalms may be applied to the life of a Christian. Marcellinus, possibly an Alexandrian deacon, had made a request to St. Athanasius regarding the Psalms. While this deacon was sick, he decided to ask the pope regarding the many lessons contained within the Psalms. While this was the request of a single clergy member regarding his desire to learn the Psalms, St. Athanasius saw in this an opportunity to serve the entire congregation, and perhaps of the Christian world, struggling to learn and understand this unique book. In a similar way, St. Paul responded to questions by few people in one city through an epistle that benefited all Christians.

St. Athanasius lovingly and joyfully responded to Marcellinus with what we know today as *St. Athanasius' Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms*. In this work, St. Athanasius understood that Marcellinus was concerned with the understanding of how the reading and practice of the Psalms would bring a Christian closer to God. What St. Athanasius delivered to Marcellinus was the very message that Christ presented to the Apostles, which the Apostles then taught the world: that our Lord is living in the Psalms, and that the Psalms are a living Psalter of the Incarnation of the Lord.

### B. THE PSALMS ARE INSPIRED AND USEFUL

St. Athanasius began by quoting 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." He explained that every book in Scripture has its purpose.

As each of these books has its own special fruit, so does the book of Psalms. As we mentioned in the beginning, the Psalms is like a garden: it contains its own special fruit, but also has the fruit of all the other books in the Bible. The difference with the Psalms is that the themes of all the other books are set to music.

### C. PROPHECIES OF THE INCARNATION IN THE PSALMS

St. Athanasius explained that there are prophecies throughout the Psalms. The Psalms contain prophecies regarding the birth of Christ. For example:

- ⊗ Psalm 49 says, "The Lord our God shall come manifestly, and shall not keep silence."
- ⊗ Psalm 117 says, "Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord: We have blessed you out of the house of the lord. God is Lord and He has shined upon us."
- ⊗ Psalm 106 says "He sent his Word, and healed them, and delivered them out of their destructions."

As St. Athanasius explained, all these Psalms are talking about the bring and coming of our Lord.



#### **D. PROPHECIES OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN THE PSALMS**

St. Athanasius also shares that there are Psalms that prophecy that the Lord would be born of a Virgin. He quotes two psalms to explain this

- ✠ Psalm 86:12: “Mother of Zion shall say, a man, and a man was begotten in her, and the Most High Himself formed her.” St. Athanasius explains that this Psalm is the same as saying: “And the Word was God, and all things were made through Him, and the Word became flesh” (John 1:1, 2, 14).
- ✠ Psalm 44: “Listen, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear; forget also your people and your father’s house, because the King has desired your beauty.”

#### **E. PROPHECIES OF THE PASSION IN THE PSALMS**

According to St. Athanasius, the Psalms also prophecy the suffering and crucifixion of the Lord.

He explains that the plot of the Jews against Christ was prophesied in Psalm 2: “Wherefore did the heathen rage, and the nations imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers gathered themselves together against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

Psalm 21 spoke of the suffering and death of Christ from Jesus’ own mouth:

You have brought me down to the dust of death. For many dogs have surrounded me; the assembly of the wicked has attacked me on all sides. They pierced my hands and feet. They counted all my bones. They divided my garments among themselves, and cast lots upon my clothes.”

#### **F. PROPHECIES OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD IN THE PSALMS**

The Psalms also prophecy of the Lord’s ascension into heaven. St. Athanasius quotes three psalms:

- ✠ Psalm 23: “Lift up your gates, you princes, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in.”
- ✠ Psalm 46: “God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with a sound of a trumpet.”
- ✠ Psalm 109 also speaks about the Lord sitting at the Right Hand of the Father: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit on my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

#### **G. THE UNIQUE MARVEL OF THE PSALMS**

The Psalms are like a mirror. When we sing the Psalms, it is as if we are looking into a mirror that reveals our souls. As we recite these words, we understand our own human emotions and what is going on in our hearts. The reason reciting the Psalms reveals the contents of our hearts is because the words of the Psalms are relatable. We read them and find that the words are describing each one of us. When we hear these words that describe what’s going on in our hearts, we respond in many different ways. We may feel sorry for our disobedience or our sin, and desire to repent. We may hear of those that hope in the Lord and be encouraged to also have hope in God. We learn of grace in the Psalms and desire to give thanks.

#### **H. PRAYING THE PSALMS**

St. Athanasius teaches us that the Psalms are divine songs that are meant to be chanted. He teaches that



there must be balance in singing the Psalms. He begins by telling us that “a hymn of praise is not suitable on the lips of a sinner” (Eccl. 15:9). He points out that we sing Psalms from a good soul, so in singing the Psalms, we need to examine our souls:

We can't continue to live in sin and sing the Psalms. If we sing the Psalms while rebelling against the Holy Spirit, the Psalms will not benefit us. In fact, they make us blameworthy. Rather, we offer Psalms to be united to the Holy Spirit. We do not just praise God with our tongues, but we praise Him with our souls.

Since we praise God with our souls, the Psalms are sung with melodies to reflect the soul. Psalms are not chanted for the sake of entertainment or creating pleasant sounds, but rather show unity with us and God as well as unity among all those offering the praises. St. Athanasius emphasizes the peace within a person's mind, body, and spirit as he sings Psalms. As we offer Psalms, the Holy Spirit unites these three so we may live according to the Spirit. Just like music has rhythm and order, our lives should have rhythm and order with the Holy Spirit. We learn the rhythm of living with the Holy Spirit by singing the Psalms from the depths of our hearts.

Returning to the analogy of the garden, St. Athanasius teaches that there is a Psalm for every human feeling, emotion, and experience. There are Psalms for repentance and confession. Others are for tribulations, trials, and hard times. There are Psalms for persecution, and protection from persecution. There are Psalms where the Psalmist suffers and talks about what is hurting him, begging the Lord for help. In these same Psalms there are offerings of thanksgiving for deliverance from suffering. As we read the Psalms that relate to us, how we are feeling, or what we are going through, we lift these up as prayers to God.

The prayers of the Psalms were lifted up by holy men of God. St. Athanasius reminds us that these saints spent their lives being transformed by God. They developed a very strong and loving relationship with him. We have the words of their prayers in the Psalms so that we could offer the prayers of these holy men as our own. We are blessed to offer these powerful words as our own prayer to God.

St. Athanasius encourages us to pray the Psalms with confidence that God hears these prayers. The Psalmist who prayed the Psalm was encouraged, so we know that we will be encouraged when we offer the same Psalm. The Psalmist was protected during persecution when he prayed the Psalm, so we will be protected when we pray the same Psalm. Through the praying of the Psalms, the demons are overcome. Through the Psalms, we are able to repent. When we sing the Psalms, we are strengthened so we may pursue the Kingdom of Heaven.



## V. St. Basil on the Psalms

### A. THE PSALMS AND THE REST OF SCRIPTURE

Before St. Basil explained Psalm 1, he gave an introduction to the Psalms. He began exactly as St. Athanasius did by saying that “All Scripture is God inspired and profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16). He taught that the Holy Spirit gave mankind the Palms as a way to heal their souls. Ecclesiastes 10:4 says, “care will cause the worst sin to stop.” The Psalms were given so man could overcome temptation and fight the desire to sin.

St. Basil continued just as St. Athanasius did by comparing the Psalms to the rest of the books in the Bible. He said that every book in the Bible has a purpose. While every book has a purpose or lesson, the Psalms contain all of these. St. Basil mentions that the Psalms bring healing to the soul and discipline to our lives. The goal of the Psalms is to praise God while living a godly life.

### B. THE PALMS ARE INSPIRED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AS MEDICINE

He returns again to the Holy Spirit. He says that the Holy Spirit saw that mankind was having a hard time living a godly life. He noticed that mankind was falling into sin. The Holy Spirit responded by providing us with beautiful melodies with spiritual lessons mixed in. He did this so the listener would enjoy the music but also learn about how to live a godly life.

St. Basil says this is similar to doctors that give their patients bitter medicines. Bitter medicine is very beneficial to the patient, but it's very hard to swallow due to its taste. The doctor, in his wisdom, puts honey on the rim of the cup so when the patient drinks the medicine, the sweet taste covers up the bitter. Just like a doctor masks the taste of bitter medicine with honey so the patient can drink it, the Holy Spirit mixes the lessons of a godly life with music so that everyone can benefit from the spiritual words. No matter where a person is in their spiritual life, they listen to the Psalms for the melody but their soul benefits from the words.

In a similar way St. John spoke in Revelation explains his experience of eating the little book from the angel's hand: “Then I took the little book out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter” (Rev. 10:10). Jeremiah the prophet spoke of the words of God as “the joy and rejoicing of my heart” (Jer. 15:16), but at the same time while Ezekiel tasted the Word of God like honey, inside was bitterness, wailing and sorrow (Ez. 2:8-9, 3:1-3, 10). While we may have difficult experiences in life, the word of God provides for us the sweetness of the knowledge of God, and comfort in our tribulations.

### C. THE SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS OF PRAYING AND SINGING THE PSALMS

St. Basil teaches that the Psalms bring *peace* to the soul. This calms down an angry and confused person. It encourages people to be peaceful and brings peace to society.

The singing of the Psalms *unites* people. It causes people who were enemies to become friends. St. Basil asks how two brothers pray a Psalm together and remain enemies. The Psalms create a bond between people that turns them from enemies into brothers and sisters. It provides us with the greatest blessing: *love*.

The harmony of the music reminds of us spiritual lessons. When the pitch of the melody rises, it reminds





us to raise our eyes high to heaven. It reminds us to go high and not be brought low by earthly desires and lusts. The music itself speaks deeply to the person, teaching us harmony and unity in the body of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

The Psalms provide the soul with many more blessings. It *protects* us from demons. It is a way to receive *help* from angels. It is comfort when we are afraid. It gives us *rest* after a hard day. It protects children. It is a *blessing* for those who are spiritually mature. It *comforts* the elders. It is a blessing for men and women. It makes the feast days joyful. It reminds us of the presence of God during times of mourning. It *softens* those with hard hearts. The Psalms are the work of angels. The chanting of the Psalms is a dwelling place in heaven. It is spiritual incense.

We sing the Psalms and learn at the same time. Our minds are enlightened with the lessons inspired by the Holy Spirit. These lessons are placed deep within our minds. These lessons *teach* us about courage, righteousness, self-control, discernment, repentance, and perseverance. The Psalms teach us about God. They provide us with prophecies of the Incarnation of Christ. They remind us of judgment.

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22. St. Basil the Great, Homily on Psalm 1, summarized



## VI. Analyzing the Psalms

Now we are going to discuss ways that we can analyze the Psalms. The purpose of this section is to provide a few different ways we can read Psalms to learn how to lift up prayer. We will begin by presenting five categories of Psalms. We can think of each analysis like a test. Under each category are a number of elements. Not all Psalms fall into these categories, and not all categories have all the elements listed. The purpose of this exercise is to learn how to read Psalms and consider how the Psalmist offers prayer. We may then learn how to offer similar prayers ourselves. For example, we may learn how to give thanks to God or how to offer Him praise.

### A. THE CATEGORIES

The categories of Psalms that we will go over in this section are (1) hymns; (2) petition or complaint of the people; (3) petition or complaint of the individual; (4) thanksgiving Psalms; and (5) wisdom Psalms.

### B. APPLYING THE CATEGORIES

The following categories each have tests using various elements, ranging from three to six to seven. As mentioned earlier, three observations will instantly be noted: (1) although a Psalm may contain all of the elements of the given category it falls into, these elements may not be in the same order listed here; (2) not every Psalm fitting that category contains each of those elements; and (3) certain Psalms contain elements of multiple categories. Many Psalms do not follow the order given, even if they contain all the elements. In analyzing and studying the Psalm, it's good to see whether any verses fit into the scheme provided.

### C. HYMNS<sup>23</sup>

Many of the Psalms fall into the category of hymns. We are used to hearing the Psalm prayed throughout the Divine Liturgy. As we read in St. Athanasius' letter, the Psalms were prayed by holy men of God. With these words they glorified God, and with these same words we also glorify Him. As we chant the Psalm, we consider these words and how awesome God is. As we consider how great, awesome, and mighty God is (Deu. 7:21, 10:17), we can't help but lift up our voices in praise. The Psalms that fall into the category of hymns share three elements: (1) A call to worship; (2) A description of God's attributes and actions; and (3) An offering of worship.

### D. PETITION OF THE PEOPLE<sup>24</sup>

The next category of the Psalms is the petitions of the people. A petition is a request made to God. Litany (*λιτανεία* in Greek) means prayer or entreaty. We hear petitions prayed in the Divine Liturgy, such as litanies for the sick, the travelers, the oblations, or those prayers included in the Seven Short Litanies. We also pray petitions in the Agpeya after the reading of the Gospel, also called "litanies."

The petitions in the Psalms are cries for God to save the people from a distressing situation. They ask

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23. See Appendix 3.1 for an analysis of a Psalm falling under the category of hymns.

24. See Appendix 3.2 for an analysis of a Psalm that falls into the category of a petitions of the people.



God to be present and save them. Although an individual Psalmist<sup>25</sup> is praying the Psalm, he prays the Psalm on behalf of the people. This is the same as when the priest prays on behalf of the congregation in the Liturgy. Although the priest is saying the prayer, the entire congregation joins him in lifting up the prayer both in their hearts and through participation in the deacon and congregation responses.

Psalms often speak of a congregation straying from God. In the Old Testament, when the children of Israel revolted against God and strayed from Him, they were often delivered into the hands of the enemy. Therefore, the Psalmist will often highlight that the cause of the distress is a result of sin, and that the attacks of the enemies are a consequence of disobeying and straying from God. However, the Psalmist appeals to God's tender mercy, mentioning the relationship between Him and His chosen people, so that God may turn away His anger from them and deliver them from tribulation. Therefore, these Psalms contain themes of repentance and confession.

There are seven common elements of a Psalm that falls under the category of complaint of the people: (1) addressing God and making the petition; (2) a reference to God's previous work; (3) a description of the suffering of the people; (4) an affirmation of their trust in God; (5) A request for relief; (6) a description of such relief; and (7) a vow.

## **E. PETITION OF THE INDIVIDUAL<sup>26</sup>**

Most of the psalms fall under this category of personal petitions. The petition of the individual is similar to the petition of the people. A personal petition is when an individual cries out to God, asking Him for deliverance from a distressing situation. The Psalmist relies on God's past actions. He also depends on God's special care towards him.

The individual prays for deliverance from social persecution. Examples of social persecution are being blamed or put down when innocent. The Psalmist may also cry out when suffering from sickness. These problems often result in anguish and abandonment. Sometimes, this is literal abandonment by the community. Other times, the Psalmist feels emotionally that he has been abandoned and cries out in distress.

Another important issue within these petitions is deliverance from sin in the form of confession. The issues here may involve a description of the sin and its consequences, for example, and how the problem the Psalmist is facing is because he has sinned. Just like the complaints of the people where their sin caused them to be delivered into the hands of the enemy, the individual Psalmist will appeal to God's previous mercy and grace to remember him, have mercy on him, and restore him once more. Included among the elements here is a unique one: God's special care towards the Psalmist. By appealing to the intimacy of the relationship, God may be quicker to turn away from His anger in order to forgive, restore, save, and deliver the Psalmist.

## **F. THANKSGIVING PSALM<sup>27</sup>**

The next category is the response to the individual petition: Psalm of Thanksgiving. As a response to deliverance from affliction, the Psalmist lifts his hands in thanksgiving. There are six elements of these Psalms:

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25. We can consider that, just as the author of the Psalm offered this on behalf of the people, we too may make petitions on behalf of the people, as well as on our own behalf.

26. See Appendix 3.3 for an analysis of a Psalm falling under the category of petitions of the individual.

27. See Appendix 3.4 for an analysis of a Psalm that falls under the category of Thanksgiving Songs.



(1) a description of thanksgiving and self-reflection; (2) a summary of the act of salvation; (3) a description of the affliction in detail; (4) a description of the salvation in detail; (5) a general Lesson learned; and (6) A vow to offer thanksgiving in public.

### **G. WISDOM PSALMS<sup>28</sup>**

A wisdom Psalm is where the Psalmist teaches a lesson about wisdom or foolishness. A Psalm falling into this category may be identified by the following three elements: (1) a call to wisdom; (2) an intent to teach; and (3) the lesson or teaching on wisdom and foolishness.

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28. See Appendix 3.5 for an analysis of a Psalm falling under the category of wisdom.



## VII. LEARNING CHRIST FROM THE PSALMS

**A**s we mentioned before, Christ showed His Apostles that the Psalms were speaking about Him. The Church Fathers saw this and went back through the Psalms to learn about Christ. This is called the Mystery of Christ: that we can see Him in the Old Testament and learn Who He is.

In this final section, we will read through the Psalms to learn about Jesus. Each Psalm will provide us with a different title or characteristic of Christ. Christ reveals Himself in many ways so that we may depend on Him throughout our lives.

### A. PSALM 1: CHRIST IS THE BLESSED MAN

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the troublesome; but his will is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by streams of waters, that produces its fruit in its season; and his leaf shall not wither, and whatever he does shall prosper. Not so are the ungodly, not so, but they are like the dust the wind drives from the face of the earth. Therefore the ungodly shall not rise in the judgment, nor sinners in the counsel of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish.” (Psalm 1).

The Book of Psalms begins by presenting Christ to us. We are shown the way of Christ so that we may follow and imitate Him. Here, our Lord is called blessed because He walks “not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the troublesome” (Ps. 1:1). Instead, His will is in “the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:2).

Christ said “the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do” (Jn. 5:19). St. Gregory of Nazianzus explained that our Lord did not mean by this He was weak. It didn’t mean that He needed the Father’s strength to do something. What He is saying here is that He loves His Father so much, He would never do something against His Father. He works together with His Father, doing the will of His Father. He does this because He and His Father deeply love one another.

As His will is in the law of the Lord, and as He meditates on His Father’s will, our will must be in the law of the Lord. We meditate on His will and make His will our own because we deeply love God. We deeply love God because He loved us first. We learn of God’s deep love for us from His Son, Who gave His life for us. Thus, our Lord became man and taught us this great love, and taught us how to live according to that love.

### B. PSALM 22: JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 22:1)

Christ explains in John 10:11-18 what it means to be the Good Shepherd:

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.



As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one Shepherd.

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.

St. Cyril of Alexandria explains that when mankind sinned, they wandered away from love toward God. Since mankind wandered away from God through sin, they were cast out of the Garden. Being cast out of the Garden, we became prey to two vicious wolves. One wolf is the devil, and the other is death. When Christ announced that He was the Good Shepherd, He battled with the vicious wolves to save us. He laid down His life for us. He died on the Cross so that He would defeat death by His death. The Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, laid down His life for us to take us out of the “dark pit of death.” He brought us out of this pit to lead us to heaven. Instead of the den of sin, He prepared mansions in His Father’s house for us. Therefore He says to us, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom” (Lk. 12:32).<sup>29</sup>

St. Cyril of Alexandria continued to teach us that when Christ said, “I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father” (Jn. 10:14-15), He was saying that we are a part of His family. The Father deeply loves His Son and is close with Him. The Son also deeply loves His Father and is close with Him. Christ knows His Father, and the Father knows His Son. In a similar, but not exact way Christ loves us and knows us. Through that love, we love and learn Christ.<sup>30</sup> We enter into a deep relationship with Him. Christ became man and became “the Firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29), so that we may have a relationship with His Father. So, in our baptism, we become “members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19) as children of God.

### **C. PSALM 30: JESUS IS OUR INTERCESSOR IN PRAYER**

“In You, O Lord, I hope; may I not be ashamed forever; in Your righteousness deliver and rescue me” (Ps. 30:1).

“I will greatly rejoice and be glad because of Your mercy, for You beheld my humiliation; You saved my soul from distress, and did not shut me up into the hands of the enemy” (Ps. 30:8-9).

“For I heard the blame of many who dwell round about when they were gathered together against me, when they plotted to take my life. But as for me, I hope in You, O Lord; I said “You are my God.” Many times are in Your hands; deliver me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Make Your face shine upon Your servant; save me in Your mercy. O Lord, do not let me be ashamed because I call upon You” (Ps. 30:14-18).

We understand that this Psalm is a prayer of the Lord from the first verse. In Luke 23:26, Christ quotes this Psalm while on the Cross, saying, “Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.” With this Psalm in mind, the Christians are “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the Right Hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2) as our Great High Priest and Mediator with the Father (Heb. 4:14, 1 Tim. 2:5) St. Paul further explains that “it is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, Who is even at the Right Hand of God,

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29. St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, summarized.

30. There is perfect unity and knowledge among the persons of the Holy Trinity, whereas we have limited, imperfect knowledge.



Who also makes intercession for us” (Rom. 8:34). He offered this Psalm to His Father while in suffering in distress on the Cross. This Psalm then becomes a prayer for our own faith. He provides us with the words for prayer while also interceding on our behalf. As He taught us the Lord’s prayer, so we too pray this prayer in His Name.

#### **D. PSALM 40: JESUS IS COMPASSIONATE TOWARDS THE POOR**

“Blessed is he who understands the poor and needy; the Lord will deliver him in an evil day” (Ps. 40:1).

“O Lord, I said, ‘Have mercy on me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against You’” (Ps. 40:5).

Our Lord loves the poor and commands that the rich love and take care of the poor. St. Cyril of Alexandria says that God wills that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4). Christ also said, “Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail” (Lk. 12:33). St. Cyril says that the Lord has given the rich a way to be saved. God gave them worldly wealth. God gave them this wealth to take care of the poor. The rich are judged on how they treat the poor. If they waste their riches on their own pleasures, they are judged. Our Lord said, “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Lk. 6:36). Therefore, He calls the rich to be merciful to the poor as the Father also is merciful. By this, the rich imitate God. As the rich help the poor, God rewards them. In this way, their soul receives benefit.<sup>31</sup>

The Lord is also concerned with the poor condition of the sinful soul. In the Psalm we read, “O Lord, I have said, ‘Have mercy on me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against you’” (Ps. 40:5). Christ has compassion on the sinful person who returns to Him. The Lord forgives the sins of the repentant person and heals their soul. Ezekiel says, “‘Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the Lord God, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?’” (Ezk. 18:23), and “Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’” (Ezk. 33:11). Our Lord also said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28).

Christ told the paralytic man, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mk. 2:5). He had compassion and healed His soul. Knowing the doubts of the scribes that Christ could heal the soul, our Lord said:

“Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house” (Mk 2:9-11).

#### **E. PSALM 44: JESUS IS KING**

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; Your royal scepter is a scepter of uprightness” (Ps. 44:7).

St. John Chrysostom explains that this Psalm is referring to Christ as king. His kingship is eternal. It has no beginning and no end. The throne is a symbol of that kingship. The scepter shows His authority.<sup>32</sup> After a voice spoke from heaven saying, “I have both glorified it and will glorify it again” (Jn. 12:28), the Lord said, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself” (Jn. 12:32). We see that the Son is

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31. St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Homily 108, summarized.

32. St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Psalm 44*



exalted upon the cross. He is lifted up that all people may glorify Him. The Church saw this Psalm and understood that it spoke about the Crucifixion of the Lord. The Church sings this Psalm on the 12th Hour of Great Friday, known as the hymn *Pekethronos*.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the death of the Lord is not a defeat. It is a victory by which death is killed. It is a victory by which Christ is exalted as king.

#### **F. PSALM 83: JESUS IS THE TEMPLE**

“How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord of hosts. My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh greatly rejoice in the living God” (Ps. 83:2-3).

In John 12:6, our Lord calls Himself “the temple that will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days.” Here, He was speaking about his death and resurrection. In Christ we find rest. When we are in the body of the Lord, we are in the true place of worship. The Body of Christ is the Church. The Lord said, “where two or three are gathered together in My Name, I am there in the midst of them” (Mt. 18:20). When we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, we are united with Him and abide in Him, as He promised. .

We prepare ourselves when going to Church to meet God and partake of communion. St. Gregory of Nazianzus teaches us that we must purify ourselves in order to come close to Christ. We need to examine ourselves before we approach God. We can’t expect God to dwell in us if we are filled with evil. We must be filled with Christ so that there is no room for evil. We must be filled with the light of Christ so that no darkness may be found within us.<sup>34</sup> We examine our hearts, especially before communion, so that we do not partake of it in an worthy manner. This is why St. Paul said:

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

#### **G. PSALM 96: JESUS IS GOD WITH US**

“The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaimed His righteousness; all the peoples saw His glory” (Ps. 96:5-6).

This Psalm is talking about Christ’s Incarnation. In Isaiah it says, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Is. 7:14). In Matthew 1:23 we read that Immanuel means “God with us.” The Lord comforts us, saying, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). In the Liturgy according to St. Basil we pray:

You have not abandoned us to the end, but have always visited us through Your holy prophets, and in the last days You manifested Yourself to us, who were sitting in the darkness and the shadow of death, through Your only-begotten Son, our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, who, of the Holy Spirit and of the holy Virgin Mary was incarnate and became man and taught us the ways of salvation.

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33. “Your Throne,” which is the first phrase in the Coptic Psalm 44:7

34. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 39: *On the Holy Lights*, summarized.





## H. PSALM 109: OUR HIGH PRIEST

“The Lord swore and will not repent, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’”  
(Ps. 109:4)

St. Paul explains in the book of Hebrews 7 that this Psalm is a prophecy of Our Lord Jesus Christ as the High Priest of mankind. He is called a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. St. Gregory of Nazianzus explains that Melchizedek is the King of Salem. Salem means peace. Melchizedek means “king of righteousness.” Therefore Christ is called the king of peace and righteousness.<sup>35</sup> St. Clement of Alexandria also says that Melchizedek offered bread and wine. Christ also offered His Holy Body and Precious Blood in the form of bread and wine.<sup>36</sup> As Melchizedek is a priest and a king, so is Christ a priest and a king. As a priest is a mediator between God and the people, Christ is the mediator between God and man.

St. Cyril of Alexandria explains the priesthood of Christ. He says that we separated ourselves from God through sin. The impurity of our lives separated us from God. Christ came and killed sin on the cross. He established peace. He joined us with God. As Melchizedek offered bread and wine to Abraham. Christ offers the blessing of the Eucharist to mankind.<sup>37</sup>

## I. PSALM 117: JESUS IS THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE THAT UNITES MANKIND

“The stone the builders rejected, the same has become the head of the corner” (Ps. 117:22).

“The Lord is my strength and song, and He became my salvation” (Ps. 117:14).

You are my God, and I will give thanks to You; You are my God, and I shall exalt You; I will give thanks to You, for You heard me; and You became my salvation. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endures forever” (Ps. 117:28-29).

We know this Psalm is about Christ because He told us Himself that He is the cornerstone.

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

“The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief cornerstone.

This was the Lord’s doing,

And it is marvelous in our eyes’?

“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (Mt. 21:42-44).

When sin entered the world, mankind was divided. When Christ entered the world, mankind was united in Him. Sin divided us. The separation caused by sin was shown in the Law. Through the Law, there was a division between people. According to the Law, there were Jews and Gentiles. When Christ died on the Cross,

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35. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 30*, the Fourth Theological Oration on God and Man

36. St. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 4.25.

37. St Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphororum in Genesisim*, 2.7-9 (PG 69:99-108).



that division was removed/abolished. There were no longer Jews or Gentiles, but one people in Christ. Through grace and participation in the Eucharist, we become a part of the household of God. In the household of God, all Christians are united together from the Old and New Testaments. The chief cornerstone of this household is Jesus. St. Paul explains in Ephesians:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in Whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:13-22).

St. Paul explains in Galatians the mystery that all people are saved in Christ. Through faith and baptism, we take part in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through faith and baptism, we take part in salvation. We all become members of the Body of Christ and all adopt our Christian identity as sons and daughters of God. He says:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26-29).

## **J. PSALM 120: OUR SHELTER<sup>38</sup>**

"I lifted my eyes to the mountains; From where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth. Let not your foot be moved; Neither let Him who keeps you slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel Shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord shall keep you; The Lord is your shelter at your right hand. The sun shall not burn you by day Nor the moon by night. The Lord shall keep you from all evil; The Lord shall keep your soul. The Lord shall keep your coming in and your going out From this present time and unto the ages" (Psalm 120).

St. John Chrysostom says that this Psalm is prayed by those who ask God to comfort them. The Psalmist does not ask man or any creation to help him. His help "from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 120:2). In Psalm 146, it says, "He shall not take pleasure in the strength of a horse, nor be pleased with the legs of a man; the Lord is pleased with those who fear Him, and with those who hope in His mercy" (Ps. 146:10-11). The strength of a horse or man cannot save us. The one whose help comes from God will be saved. We pray in Psalm 145, "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob; His hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them, who keeps truth forever" (Ps. 145:5-6).

Verse 7 says, "The Lord shall keep you from all evil; the Lord shall keep your soul" (Ps. 120:7). St. John Chrysostom says that the one who protects us from even the sun and moon will protect us from all sorts of

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38. One of the Psalms of the Ascent, Psalms 119 to 133.



evils. These evils may be spiritual evils. Others may be troubles caused by others. The help of God is greater than any human help. A friend can help one time, but may fail another. Sometimes a friend wants to help. Other times the friend cannot or will not. However, God is all powerful. He is effective. He is able to save us from every trouble. No matter how terrible the situation, God can set us free.<sup>39</sup>

David depended on the Lord as his Help and Strength when he battled Goliath. David contemplated on his battle with Goliath and offered a praise to God. This song of praise is Psalm 151.<sup>40</sup> In Psalm 151, David praises God for allowing him to overcome Goliath. David trusted that God would protect him from every evil. Before he fought, David told Saul that he had fought and defeated lions and bears. As God protected him then, David trusted God would protect him against Goliath. David was victorious and offered glory to God. David prays in Psalm 143:

Blessed is the Lord my God, who trains my hands for battle, my fingers for war; He is my mercy and my refuge, my helper and my deliverer, my protector in whom I hope, who subjects my people under me. (Ps. 143:1-2).

Psalm 120 is part of a category of Psalms called Songs of Ascent,<sup>41</sup> which are prayed on the way to Church. The Church understands that the “**mountain**” is a symbol of Mount Zion, which is heaven. St. Paul says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels” (Heb. 12:22). When we look to the mountain of the Lord, we find salvation. When we look towards God for our help, we can join the Psalmist asking for mercy, saying, “My eyes, O Lord, O Lord, are toward You; in You I hope; take not my soul away” (Ps. 140:8).

When Elisha’s servant was afraid, Elisha prayed that God would show him that the Lord is with them. As the Psalmist prayed, “I lifted my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?” (Ps. 120:1), Elisha’s servant lifted his eyes to the mountain and saw the help of the Lord:

And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, and said, “Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kgs. 6:15-17).

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39. St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Psalm 120, Summarized.

40. See Appendix 4 for Psalm 151.

41. Psalm 119-133.



## VIII. CONCLUSION

The book of Psalms is inspired by the Holy Spirit so that mankind could learn how to live a godly life. We continue to pray the Psalms. In the Psalms we find a mirror into our own souls. The words of the Psalms become our own. Through the Psalms we learn how to offer prayer. Through the Psalms, we learn how to form our own prayers. Through the Psalms, we are given prayers written by the Holy Spirit. We offer these Psalms on every condition so that we may have the peace of Jesus Christ in our hearts. Through the Psalms, we learn Who Jesus is. Throughout the Psalms, He is described. The Psalms give prophecies of the Lord. The Psalms describe His love towards us. The Psalms offer songs of thanksgiving and hymns glorifying God. The Psalms provide us with spiritual lessons and teach us how to live a godly life in Christ.

As we have seen the men of God throughout the centuries pray the Psalms, we too follow a long tradition of those inspired by the Holy Spirit, receiving these prayers handed down from tradition to tradition, from law to grace, from one covenant to another, seeing and revealing Christ through mystical words whose words are understood by the heart and contemplated by the mind.

Let us continue to pray the Psalms, taking them into memory, that we may speak to each other in Psalms, as St. Paul says, that we may offer Psalms when we are cheerful, that we may find a Psalm for every occasion, that at the time of temptation or jubilation, we may cry out to the Lord with the words He has taught us, those that He has given to His Apostles, to the Fathers, and into our own hands through the Church.

*Glory be to God, forever. Amen.*



# APPENDIX 1: PSALM CHARTS

## 1. THE FIVE BOOKS OF THE PSALMS

<i>Book</i>	<i>Psalms</i>
I	1-41
II	42-72
III	73-89
IV	90-106
V	107-151

## 2. AUTHORS OF THE PSALMS

<i>Author</i>	<i>Number of Psalms</i>	<i>Psalms</i>
David	84	3-40, 42, 50, 64, 68-70, 90, 92-98, 100, 102-103, 107-109, 130, 132, 136-144, 151
Solomon	2	71, 126
Sons of Korah	10	41, 43-48, 83-84, 86
Asaph	12	49, 72-82
Heman the Ezrahite	1	87
Moses	1	89
Aggeus & Zacharias	6	145-150
“Poor Man”	1	101
Anonymous	33	1, 2, 65-67, 91, 99, 104-106, 11-125, 127-129, 131, 133-135



### 3. COMPARISON BETWEEN CANON OF THE PSALMS IN THE TANAKH AND IN THE SEPTUAGINT

<i>Tanakh (Hebrew)</i>	<i>Septuagint (Greek)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
1-8	1-8	These are the same
9-10	9	Psalms 9 and 10 in the Hebrew are combined into Psalm 9 in the Greek
11-113	10-112	The Greek numbering is one behind
114-115	113	Psalms 114 and 115 in Hebrew are combined into Psalm 113 in the Greek
116	114-115	Psalm 116 in the Hebrew is divided into Psalms 114 and 115 in the Greek
117-146	116-145	The Greek numbering is one behind
147	146-147	Psalm 147 in the Hebrew is divided into Psalms 146 and 147 in the Greek
148-150	148-150	The numbering is the same
	151	This Psalm is outside of the Traditional 150, but is recognized as canon according to the Deuterocanon



## APPENDIX 2: PSALMS OF THE ASCENT PRAYED AT CHURCH

### 1. ON THE WAY TO CHURCH

a. Psalm 121<sup>42</sup>

I was glad for those who said to me, "We will go into the house of the Lord." Our feet stood in the courts of Jerusalem, Jerusalem which is built as a city that is closely compacted together. For there the tribes went up, the tribes of the Lord, as a testimony for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. For there are set thrones for judgment, even thrones for the house of David.

Ask for the things which are for the peace of Jerusalem, and for the prosperity to those who love you. Let peace be within your strength, and prosperity in your heavy towers. For the sake of my brethren and my companions, I have indeed spoken peace concerning you. Because of the house of the Lord our God, I have diligently sought good things for you. Alleluia.

b. Psalm 26:4-5<sup>43</sup>

One thing I have asked of the Lord, this also I will seek, that I should dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, that I should behold the fair beauty of the Lord, and visit His holy temple. For in the day of my afflictions He hid me in His tabernacle; He sheltered me in the secret of His tabernacle; He set me up on a rock.

c. Psalm 64:4

Blessed is the man You choose,

And cause to approach You,

That he may dwell in Your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of Your house,

Of Your holy temple.

### 2. UPON ENTERING THE CHURCH

a. Psalm 83<sup>44</sup>

How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord, God of hosts! My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh have exulted in the living God. For, the sparrow has found for himself a home, and the turtledove for herself a nest, where she may lay her young; Your altars, O Lord, God of hosts, my King, and my God.

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42. Eleventh Hour/Vespers Psalm

43. First Hour Psalm

44. Sixth Hour Psalm



Blessed are all who dwell in Your house; they will praise You forever and ever. Blessed is the man whose help is from You, O Lord; he sets paths upwards in his heart in the valley of weeping, in the place which he has appointed, for there the Law-Giver will grant blessings. They shall go from strength to strength; the God of gods shall be revealed in Zion.

O Lord, God of hosts, hear my prayer; hearken, O God of Jacob. Behold, O God our defender, and look upon the face of Your anointed. For one day in Your courts is better than thousands. I chose to throw myself down in the house of God, more than to dwell in the tents of the sinners. For the Lord God loves mercy and truth; He shall give grace and glory; the Lord shall not withhold good things from those who walk in innocence. O Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man who hopes in You. Alleluia.

### 3. PSALMS RECITED IN FRONT OF THE ALTAR

a. Psalm 5:7<sup>45</sup>

But as for me, according to the multitude of Your mercy I shall enter Your house; I shall worship before Your holy temple in Your fear.

b. Psalm 122<sup>46</sup>

Unto You I have lifted up my eyes, O You who dwell in heaven. Behold as the eyes of servants are unto the hands of their masters, and as the eyes of a maidservant to the hands of her mistress; so our eyes are toward the Lord our God until He has pity on us. Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us, for we are exceedingly filled with contempt, and our soul has been exceedingly filled. Give the reproach to those who prosper, and contempt to the proud. Alleluia.v

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45. First Hour Psalm

46. Eleventh Hour/Vespers Psalm



CHURCH Study

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE  
and the Agpeya



# I. INTRODUCTION

When our Lord was asked, “What is the greatest commandment in the law,” He responded, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt. 22:37-39). Love of God and knowledge of Him are intertwined. So let us begin our journey toward the knowledge of God to reach this perfect love.

## A. TO KNOW GOD

There is a difference between knowing someone, and being acquainted with them. You may have many acquaintances, but few friends, especially in this digital age. Likewise, knowledge of God must be sincere and deep. Cognitive knowledge about God is insufficient; for relationship with God is personal and foundational. Such a relationship allows us to truly rejoice in His love.

This intimate relationship is reflected in the Hebrew understanding of knowledge. The verb “to know” (in Hebrew, ‘*yada*’) has a multifaceted meaning in the Old Testament. First, denotes meaning of entering into a covenantal relationship. This is perhaps most clear when God speaks about his relationship with Abrahaham: “For I have *known* him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him” (Gn. 18:19). When God speaks about “knowing Abraham,” He is stating that He has entered into a covenantal relationship with Abraham; a relationship that cannot be broken.

How do we enter into this covenant with God? How do we get to know Him intimately, in a person-to-person relationship? It is through spiritual discipline: experiencing God through our faith in *sacramental* living. We can experience our Lord and He will make His presence known to us in His grace; however, it requires that we “ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and [we will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Mt. 7:7-8). This requires us to persistently and earnestly desire to spend time with Him by “enter[ing] by the narrow gate...because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Mt. 7:13-14).



## II. SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

**S**piritual discipline is the facilitation of a person's spiritual life through the application of spiritual practices and laws in order to meet face to face with our Creator and have a personal relationship with Him through grace.

Spiritual disciplines regulate our life in order to facilitate a drive and a passion for God and a means by which to do that. It helps us to differentiate the right path from the wrong path and leads us to eternal life. Many of the spiritual elders in the Church develop spiritual guidelines, like rules, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help growth in the spiritual life.

This is why it is important and essential, that as we come to *know* God in a covenantal relationship,<sup>1</sup> to practice daily in order to have a living connection with Him. Just as we need to practice an instrument, sport, or academic subject daily to become proficient, we must commit to practicing our spiritual disciplines daily in order to develop/invest in our relationship with God. This is the fullness and abundance of life (Jn. 10:10).

Our Spiritual discipline is comprised of directives and principles that normally come to mind when speaking about worship. These include prayer, reading the Word, repentance, and communion. Indeed, our relationship with God is a mystery. It is something we are unable to fully fathom and define, since our Lord is infinite and beyond comprehension. So, we shall limit our discussion to these principles mentioned above. We shall also explore the importance of having a spiritual guide in this process and the possible hindrances that prevent us from abiding by our discipline.

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1. Consider the old covenant between God and Abraham and the covenant of grace between God and man. Whereas the former relied on the blood of animals, the latter relies on the blood of Christ. This a covenant by which God is faithful to save those who partake of the blood of His Son. This involves abiding in such covenant, the exchange of promises in which Christ grants salvation to those Who partake of Him.



## III. THE AGPEYA AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

### A. PRAYER

Prayer is the most fundamental work of our spiritual discipline as it is indispensable for living just as food and water are indispensable. For in prayer, our spirit is always in constant contact with God, allowing eternal life and salvation to take root in our souls. Prayer is truly the most intimate form of connection as we are in the process of searching ourselves, our hearts, our condition and we present these things to God. It is this deep and real prayer where we confess, in our vulnerability, how broken we are and it is in this intimate communication that we come to learn who He is. As we reveal ourselves to God, He reveals Himself to us. We come to *know* God in a covenantal relationship just as David did in the Psalms.

By understanding this, we must realize a crucial thing when we come to meet God face to face in prayer: it is always a critical moment, a crisis where we must be open to receiving Christ because it is a moment of judgment for us where we are either saved or condemned.<sup>2</sup> Are there not times when we come to our Lord in prayer only as a formality, to speak of our own glory, or at times seeking something from Him rather than Him?

As we gain a picture of the life of spiritual discipline in prayer, we must begin to ask, how does one enter into this spiritual life of prayer? In Matthew 6:6, our Lord says: “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” Thus, the first thing we must do before we pray is to “**shut the door**”—that is, to detach ourselves, in regard to our heart, thoughts, and other people.

To “shut the door,” then, it is necessary to put away all responsibilities, errands, anxious thoughts, and worldly desires when we stand before God. When meeting face to face with the Lord, we must “put to death our members which are on the earth” (Col. 3:5), by placing the image of the crucified Christ before us.

To shut the door in order to enter into covenant relation with God, we must remember the words Christ taught us to pray in Matthew 6:10-13.

As we enter into this commitment of prayer, we find that this is no easy task. We can reflect on our own lives how we daily fall and walk away from Christ. However, our Orthodox Church has provided us with the perfect teacher to guide and challenge us in prayer and in our walk of Spiritual Discipline: The Agpeya.

### B. IMPORTANCE OF THE AGPEYA IN OUR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

The Canonical Book of Hours is our teacher in this journey to know God and it is important to understand why we use the Agpeya:

#### a. *Structure of Prayer and the Experience of God*

We have a structured form of prayer inspired by the Holy Spirit as we need guidance in prayer and a sys-

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2. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger, 2004), 27.



tem to teach us. The foundation of the Agpeya gives us a window into how to pray our own personal prayers by expounding on the meaning of the words and personalizing them. The Psalms, written by the Holy Spirit, provide us with depth and a special form of prayer, unlike any others.

Structured prayer benefits us in that we often tend to forget important aspects of prayer. The Agpeya gives us a concrete experience of offering to God daily worship and praise. The hours of the Agpeya contain the essential facets of prayer including glorifying and praising God, giving thanks, asking for mercy, and seeking intercession.

*b. Perseverance in Prayer*

The Agpeya helps us persevere in prayer as we can be very short and superficial in our prayers. Using the Agpeya we learn to stand in God's presence and pour our hearts out to the Lord. The repeated praying of psalms, whether or not it suits our mood or frame of mind at the moment, is what teaches us perseverance and discipline in prayer. As the Gospel declares, "that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Lk. 18:1).

*c. Control of the Passions and Emotions*

The psalms encapsulate all human emotion as the Holy Spirit designed the Psalms to speak to every aspect of the human condition: joy and sorrow, hardship and plenty, strength and weakness, persecution and authority.

*d. Remembrance/Mindfulness of God throughout the Day*

The Agpeya also allows us to remember God at all times of the day. The Agpeya allows us to lift up our hearts to God within the interval of every three hours and contemplate on the events of the hour and thank God for His blessings. This helps us involve God in the details of our life and, as a result, we *sanctify* our time.

*e. Following the Example of our Lord*

The Lord taught us to pray at all times. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our great example in the life of prayer. Many instances in which He has quoted the psalms. By praying the hours, we are imitating our Savior in the life of prayer. The Lord used to pray early morning: "Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed" (Mk. 1:35). He prayed at the Sixth Hour when He was crucified, asking forgiveness for His crucifiers saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Lk. 23:34). Christ also prayed at the Ninth Hour, committing His spirit into His Father's hands, saying, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Lk. 23:46). He prayed at night after sending the entire day in teaching and healing, "when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there" (Mt. 14:23). Lastly, at midnight, the Lord prayed three times in Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36-45). He also attracted our attention to the importance of being ready by the midnight prayer in His teachings as in the Parable of the Ten Virgins.

*f. Educated in Doctrine.*

It teaches us about our faith and how to express in worship. When praying the hours of the Agpeya, we recite dogmatic proclamations that summarize our faith in the Holy Trinity. In the Agpeya, we pray to and through the Holy Trinity, we make the Sign of the Cross and begin with a doxology to the Holy Trinity, and the Thanksgiving prayer and many other prayers, especially absolutions end with a glorification to the Per-



sons of the Holy Trinity. Everything is “from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.”

Many of the hours of the Agpeya have a spiritual meaning related to that hour in regards to the “Divine economy”<sup>3</sup> in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. This plan refers to the creation and salvation of mankind through the action of the Holy Trinity. This divine plan was in the mind of God before the ages and is being carried out over time as we begin to enter into union with Him through prayer. In the Agpeya, we also give proper honor to the Holy Virgin Mary and the idea of intercession in the *Theotokion*. The prayers also remind us of our fellowship with the angels: “Let us praise with the angels saying...”, “send us an angel of peace to protect us.”

g. Promotes Unity in Community.

The unity in spirituality when using the Agpeya to pray is shown in two ways: (1) we pray *with* each other, and (2) we pray *for* each other. The pronouns “we” and “us” are mentioned hundreds of times throughout the Agpeya. As St. Athanasius writes, “In like manner, the priests by their singing contributed towards the calming of the people’s spirits and helped to unite them with those who lead the heavenly choir.” Likewise, St. Basil teaches us, “Psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining the people into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity,” and “A psalm forms friendships, unites those separated, conciliates those at enmity.

His Holiness Pope Shenouda III speaks much on this spiritual unity acquired through prayer:

Thus the same prayers are recited by all the children of the Church, all over the world: in Egypt, Sudan, Jerusalem, in the East and in the West. They are the same prayers as those offered in America, Canada, Australia and Africa. Everyone prays with one spirit and one mind. Consequently, the feeling of participation and holy fellowship pervades. The same applies to the prayers offered during the different holy mysteries: communion, marriage, etc... The same liturgies, benedictions, and sanctifications are offered everywhere.

In fact, this helps to create a spiritual unity too. This is achieved through the use of the same expressions in prayers, sermons, and spiritual doctrines which occur in the Agpeya. It is also attained through the participation in the meditations and emotions inspired by the wording of the prayers in their consequent effect of the feelings of the whole congregation. In all these ways, we form one church: not only due to shared dogmas and rituals but due to shared spiritual features as well. This cannot be realized if we confine ourselves to individual worship where everyone follows his own whims and thought.<sup>4</sup>

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3. The term “Economy” is a technical term referring to God’s divine plan of salvation. When we consider the economy, we can consider the saving works of God. These works can be summarized as the manifestation of God to mankind, the Incarnation, Baptism, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The Economy continues as we have received the Holy Spirit, Who continues to sanctify us especially through the Holy Mysteries. Spiritual discipline, then, is our conformity to the Holy Spirit, Who teaches us to live a godly life. It is by such discipline that the Economy is fulfilled in mankind: that by learning and living according to the virtue taught by the Holy Spirit, we may “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), that the Lord may complete that good work which He has begun in us (Phil. 1:6).

4. HH Pope Shenouda III, “The Spirituality of the Coptic Horologion (Agpeya),” *Become Orthodox*, <http://becomeorthodox.org/prayer/the-spirituality-of-the-coptic-horologion-agpeya/>.



## IV. Etymology and Structure OF THE AGPEYA

**A**gpeya is the Arabic derivation of the Coptic root word “ti agp” which means hour. The Agpeya is a prayer book used at specified times throughout the day composed primarily of Psalms, excerpts of the Gospels, and litanies. Within the Book of Hours, there are seven hours that all people pray, being the First, Third, Sixth, Ninth, Eleventh, Twelfth, and Midnight Hours. Some books in English refer to these by their *Latin* terms: Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline hours.

There is significance as to why there are seven hours. St. Paul tells us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Th. 5:17). When we chant in the eighth part of the Sunday Theotokia, “Seven times a day, I will praise Your name, with all my heart, O God of everyone,”<sup>5</sup> the number “seven” represents completion or perfection. So, when we pray “seven times a day” we learn how to pray unceasingly in a perfect manner. This involves looking at the structure of the Agpeya, which is provided as a table in Appendix 1.

The hours of the Agpeya are chronologically laid out corresponding to the events of the life of our Lord, Jesus Christ, each containing a theme that challenges us to contemplate on our own humanity and journey through Spiritual discipline and some of the Psalms and Gospel readings prayed within each hour reflect the theme and commemoration of that hour. A table outlining the themes of each hour is provided in Appendix 2.

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5. Psalm 118:164



## V. How to Use the Agpeya

**I**n building up the spiritual discipline of praying the Agpeya it is important to know how to prepare and enter into a space with God:

### A. CONSECRATE A PLACE FOR PRAYER

It is first important to consecrate a place for prayer where your Bible, Agpeya and other spiritual books are placed, as well as an icon and vigil lamp if possible. “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand *is* holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). Keep this place sacred and holy and do not treat it like any other place.

### B. CLEAR YOUR MIND

To behold the glory of God, we must enter into our room, into the quiet place and shut the doors of the world. This includes the physical noises of our cell phones, those in our immediate environment, and any other distractions as we possibly can. This also includes the spiritual noises of uncertainty, confusion, and disobedience.

### C. EXAMINE YOUR HEART AND RECALL SHORTCOMINGS

Standing in the presence of the Lord, enter in humility and repentance just as the Publican and not the Pharisee. This should not be superficial exercise, but the search for the depth of the soul, your inner self. Use this as a time to examine yourself. We must identify all impurity for God to cleanse it. Ask the Lord to remove any impurity in your heart so you can discover your true self. This is the sincerity of prayer and life with God. This is holy acceptable prayer. As St. John Chrysostom says, “We should offer up doxologies to God with fear and a contrite heart, in order that they may be accepted like fragrant incense.”<sup>6</sup>

### D. OFFER YOUR BODY UP IN PRAYER (POSTURES FOR PRAYER).

Our Orthodox worship involves the spirit, body and the mind. Since we are composed of body and spirit, our worship to God also contains two elements: we worship God with our bodily lips and our rubrics, and we worship God in spirit and truth. So too we are baptized in water and Spirit, and partake of the mysteries of God physically and spiritually. Therefore, our prayer and worship contains both. It cannot simply be done in body without the spirit; nor can we worship spiritually without the body.

Therefore, our posture in prayer is important. Our posture during prayer should exhibit reverence, dignity, and awe. So, we should not pray lethargically, cross-legged or propped up against a wall. During our prayer, the devil often works to make us feel tired, sick, exhausted, or sleepy. We should recognize how some weariness belongs to spiritual warfare. Let us consider the following examples of postures of prayer:

- ✠ **Standing with Hands out (Orans).** Since the Early Church, the posture for praying Our Father was called the *orans* position, with hands outstretched sideways, and palms facing up or out.<sup>7</sup>

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6. St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 140*.

7. This is a loanword from Medieval Latin translated as *one who is praying or pleading*. *Orant* or *orante*, is a posture or bodily attitude of prayer.





- ⊗ **Standing Upright, facing forward.** This is the general position of prayer during worship. This is especially the case in the reading of the Holy Gospel, during the Anaphora, and litanies. That is why at the start of each litany, the deacon instructs the people to stand up for prayer.
- ⊗ **Standing with Head Inclined.** This is the posture often when the deacon says “Bow your heads to the Lord.” This is the typical posture during reading of the Absolution Prayer of Raising of Incense, for example. Sometimes, the faithful will also kneel with the head bowed (see below).
- ⊗ **Metanoia.** “We should make prostrations when offering worship, and we should make the sign of the cross and confess our faith in the Trinity while also submitting ourselves to crucifying our wills. There are three types of metanias
  - ⊗ *Worship*--This is done before the altar and before God in prayer (as at the start of the First Hour).
  - ⊗ *Repentance*--which is done while fasting, *not* on Saturdays, Sundays, or Feast days. During the Great Fast, we have special litanies said during Morning Raising of Incense where the faithful are called to “Bow the knees” after each prayer.
  - ⊗ *Respect*: Before the ranks of bishop and the relics of the saints. In Greek a different word is used to refer to these type of metanoias, called “reverences” because we revere a saint or icon.
  - ⊗ While the metanoias look the same externally, they are to be distinguished in what is said by the worshipper during the metanoia.
- ⊗ **Kneeling with Head bowed.**<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the metanoia of worship, however this type of bowing is usually for an extended time. For example, when the deacon instructs the people to “Worship God in fear and trembling,” at the time of the descent of the Holy Spirit (the Epiclesis) during the Divine Liturgy, the faithful will bow until the prayer is completed. It is also used during the three Prostration (Kneeling) Prayers of Holy Feast of Pentecost. Each of these prayers also are much longer, than when a priest will offer a metanoia of worship toward the altar of God.
- ⊗ **Kneeling with Head up.** This is typically the position for ordination prayers.
- ⊗ **Beating the Chest.** We should also beat our chest as a sign of repentance, as in the Twelfth Hour litany: “...But I take example of the publican, beating my chest and saying ‘O God, forgive me and have mercy on me, a sinner.’”

## E. CHANT THE PSALMS

When chanting, words are lengthened and dragged out, while at the same time they span various tonal inflections of the human voice. The harmony of music can be a sign of harmony of the soul. St. Athanasius says chanting is “not designed to tickle the aesthetic palate, and it is rather for the soul’s own profit that the Psalms are sung. This is so chiefly for two reasons...” 1) St. Athanasius says this freedom of chanting allows people to “express their **love** to God with all the strength and power they possess.” and 2) He states: “To sing the Psalms demands such **concentration** of a man’s whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought

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8. Sometimes this is also called “prostration.” But to avoid confusion we have used descriptive terms here.



by harmony to one effect; and he is thus no longer to be found thinking good and doing evil.”

St. John Chrysostom adds, “Learn to chant psalms, and you will see the delightfulness of their use. For those who chant psalms are filled with the Holy Spirit, as those who sing satanic songs are filled with an unclean spirit.” and “Nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth, releases it from the prison of the body, teaches it to love wisdom and to despise all the things of this life, as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm.”<sup>9</sup>

#### **F. SAY THE PRAYERS AS YOUR OWN**

St. Athanasius writes, “Each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person’s feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself...offering the words to God as his own heart’s utterance, just as though he himself had made them up.”<sup>10</sup>

#### **G. STUDY THE AGPEYA AND THE PSALMS**

Studying the Psalms requires that you be mindful of what each part means, and not just be mindful, but turn it into heartfelt prayer. If you do not understand something, look into it! As St. Athanasius writes “...to those who really study it, the Psalter yields a special treasure.” We have so many commentaries on the psalms and prayers in our Church. As we understand the words of the Psalm, we are able to contemplate on the emotions and prayer of the Psalmist. We understand the circumstance or situation in which he prayed. We pray the Psalms in the same circumstance, asking that God listens to us as He did the Psalmist. The words, then, become our own words, and the prayers become our own prayer. Therefore, do not move from one word to the other without grasping its truth and depth of meaning. This will focus your attention, not distract it.

For example, we may not understand why we pray “Lord have mercy” 41 times each hour in the Agpeya. Studying will enlighten us to remember the 39 lashes on the back of our Savior, the crown of thorns and the spear. So we ask Him for His mercy persistently for the sake of His life-giving sufferings. The persistence in prayer is evaluated by the Lord as He taught us (Lk. 18:1-7; 11:8-10). This creates greater depth and meaning in our prayer when we come to understand what and why we are praying these words.

#### **H. START SMALL**

Start small by adding one hour to your daily routine. Think about the time that works best for you (morning, lunch, evening, bedtime). Short and consistent is much better than long and infrequent. Do not add more to your plate unless you have built a daily routine. Seek the advice of your father of confession and/or spiritual guide if you want to increase your prayers.

#### **I. HAVE A MOMENT OF SILENCE AFTER LEAVING PRAYER**

After we have emptied yourself in prayer of the negative feelings, impure thoughts, sinful actions, imperfect reactions, and anything sinful in us, we leave time for silence so God may speak to us, advise us, bless us, and direct our lives. Very simply, we stay silent, so God may speak. Do not jump to the computer/phone/tv but allow yourself to absorb the prayer and letting it settle in your mind/heart. Cross yourself, kiss

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9. St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 41*.

10. St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, pp. 103-106.



the icons, and allow time for meditation and silence. Let your mind ponder the prayer--it is at these moments when God speaks, when we see His glorious Face, when we embark on doing His will, and when He experience His glory!

**J. BE PERSISTENT**

The life of prayer is a life of constant struggle. Every other temptation or struggle you go through will end in due time. But every time you lift your heart and try to get close to God, a million things come up. No form of “spiritual warfare” or ascetic practice is as important as prayer, so try to incorporate it in your life regardless of how short and quick it is.



## VI. DIRECTIVES OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

As the Agpeya is the teacher of prayer and forming our Spiritual Discipline, we continue to develop that discipline through understanding others directives and possible hindrances in our spiritual journey. Together, all these encompass covenantal, sacramental/mystical living with God.

### A. HINDRANCES TO OUR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

As we continue on our journey to *know* God, it is important to be aware of possible hindrances that obstruct the connection with God. It is important that in these instances, we provide ourselves with time for self-examination to understand our inner impediments and seek guidance from a spiritual advisor. St. Isaiah the Solitary in “On Guarding the Intellect,” writes of the importance of guarding ourselves against possible hindrances,

I entreat you not to leave your heart unguarded, so long as you are in your body. Just as a farmer cannot feel confident about the crop growing in his fields, because he does not know what will happen to it before it is stored away in his granary, so a man should not leave his heart unguarded so long as he still has breath in his nostrils. Up to his last breath, he cannot know what passion will attack him; so long as he breathes, therefore, he must not leave his heart unguarded, but should at every moment pray to God for His help and mercy.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to examine possible impediments and sins that may be holding us back and while there is a myriad of to look at, we will be focusing on three: Apathy & Despondency, Busyness, and Pride.

#### a. *Apathy*

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth (Revelation 3:15).

Lukewarmness is having a lack of passion, zeal, or desire. The consequence is that God will vomit you out of His mouth. This is rejection and separation—which leads to death. When we are lukewarm, our soul is sick and requires spiritual medicine. Lukewarmness can be described as the condition of apathy.

**Apathy** means to lack interest or enthusiasm. An apathetic person doesn’t care about important things. They don’t care to work on their spiritual relationship with God. They do not care about the church. Apathy quickly leads to the spiritual death because we no longer care about imitating and having a relationship with God. In fact, our apathy—lukewarmness—makes God vomit us out.

Apathy can express itself in a few ways. Perhaps we are restless and can’t sit still or by ourselves. Perhaps we are lazy and don’t want to do anything. Maybe we find that we want to oversleep, overeat, and over-indulge in distractions. The person going through these motions is trying to distract themselves from the pain in their life. This is pain caused by separation from God. This is pain also caused by the lack of meaning in our lives. Instead of turning to God and the church for healing, we seek sin to distract and numb us to the

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11. St. Isaiah the Solitary, *On Guarding the Intellect*, §15, p. 25



pain. Instead of focusing on spiritual discipline, we seek to busy ourselves so that way the preoccupations can help us forget, even for a few moments, that the separation from God is killing us.

b. Busyness

As we mentioned, apathy can lead to busyness as a means of distracting ourselves from what is most important in our lives. This section describes the problem of busyness. As we will see, busyness are those preoccupations that draw us away from the spiritual. These will range from innocent preoccupations—such as service—to those preoccupations that require us to make decisions using wisdom (discernment)—such as how much time we spend on or whether we love the material—to the most life threatening of preoccupations—rejection of God to pursue fulfilling the lusts of the flesh.

Busyness hurts us spiritually when we spend all our energy on worldly pursuits. Solomon calls such vanity of vanity, in which man labors under the sun for no purpose at all. “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:2-3). When we labor without the Lord, we labor in vain and become tired. When we labor for the worldly, we become spiritually tired.

c. Pride

We come back to the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) where we see in meeting face to face with God, the Pharisee stands in his own pride. While he kept some spiritual rules in prayer, fasting and giving tithes, he was self-righteous and looked down on others. He was not righteous in the sight of God.

Pride is the denial of God and the contempt of others. It rejects God’s almighty power and help and gives glory to one’s self. Who is the greatest example of pride, but the devil, himself? His pride in his own glory and ability caused him to fall. The symptoms of pride can be described as rejecting criticism, denying help, asking for validation and glory, denying responsibility of our own actions, and denying the God’s hand in our success.

In working on the sin of pride, it is important to remember that, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6). Also consider what is written in Luke 17:10, “When you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” It is important to remember that in keeping the commandments we are doing the least of our duty and should not not expect praise.

## **B. IMPORTANCE OF A SPIRITUAL GUIDE**

As we begin to navigate through the commitment to relationship with God through spiritual discipline, it is important that we have an advisor walking with us in this journey. Bishop Seraphim highlights this importance:

The advisor, a good steward of your faith and commitment to God, leads you along the way. The advisor is there to help you to adjust your relations with others, mend your ways, and repentance.

Don’t you know that each spiritual exercise has its value? Every work has its direction? Every step has its specific time? Each circumstance has its own occasion? If anyone tries to reach what is beyond his capability, at the wrong time, he will not gain anything but on the contrary, he might harm himself.” From the above we learn that it is essential to take the advice of the experienced, to ensure that we are



following the right spiritual path, acceptable to the Lord.

He stresses that we need to understand, appreciate and elevate our spirituality above what is materialistic, as the latter is perishable but the spirit is eternal. To do so we need to be guided by a person who has experienced and reached such a level of spirituality, who would help us in our walk and guide us to persevere in the Spiritual [Discipline].<sup>12</sup>

We can find this person in our Father of Confession as well as other spiritual guides such as leaders in the church and/or Sunday school servants. In this encounter with a spiritual guide, we find not so much a set of rules, but rather a one-on-one relationship that is nourished and held by the Holy Spirit. As mentioned above, our personal relationship with Christ happens and is anchored in the community of the church and within that community we create these special relationships where we can enter, broken and weak, and be loved and guided without judgment, creating a relationship that is intimate and authentic, allowing us to open our hearts and eyes to God and our own failings without fear.

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12. Bishop Seraphim, *Spiritual Canon: Guidelines to Spirituality*, §10 Spiritual Canon According to St. Isaac the Syrian.



## VII. CONCLUSION

To merely view this as testing material is a grave sin, to now have this knowledge and do nothing further with it will come with judgment. However, in order to grow and make change you must make a commitment to pursue God because without that commitment you will not merely stand still, but wilt away. This starts with kneeling down in front of God with your Agpeya, meeting with your spiritual guide to begin this journey of Spiritual Discipline, and having an attitude that is consistent with your worship. We must remember, however, that spiritual disciplines are not the ends in themselves; communion with God, to *know* Him, is everything.



# APPENDIX 1

## 1. GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE AGPEYA

<i>Introductory Prayers</i>	<i>Introductory Doxology</i> <i>Lord's Prayer</i> <i>Thanksgiving Prayer</i> <i>Psalm 50</i>
Seven Hours: First, Third, Sixth, Ninth, Eleventh Twelfth Midnight (3 Watches)	Twelve Psalms (with exception: First Hour, Veil, First Watch and Second Watches of the Mid-night Hour) Gospel Passage Litanies to the Holy Trinity and the Holy Virgin Mary Trisagion and Lord's Prayer (1st hour, 12th hour, Midnight) Hail to you/Intro to the Creed/Creed (1st hour, 12th hour, Midnight) 41 Kyrie eleison (39 lashes + crown + spear) Holy, Holy, Holy and Lord's Prayer Prayer of Absolution (The First Hour has two absolutions) <sup>13</sup> Standard Conclusion: "Have mercy on us O God and have mercy on us..."

## 2. THE AGPEYA AND THE PSALTER

<i>Hour</i>	<i>Psalms included in the Agpeya</i>
First	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 24, 26, 62, 66, 69, 112, 142
Third	19, 22, 23, 25, 28, 29, 33, 40, 42, 44, 45, 46
Sixth	53, 56, 60, 62, 66, 69, 83, 84, 85, 86, 90, 92
Ninth	95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 109, 110, 111, 112, 114, 115
Eleventh (Sunset)	116, 117, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128
Twelfth	129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 136, 137, 140, 141, 145, 146, 147
Midnight: First Watch	3, 6, 12, 69, 85, 90, 116, 117, 118(1-22)
Midnight: Second Watch <sup>14</sup>	119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128
Midnight: Third Watch <sup>15</sup>	129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 136, 137, 140, 141, 145, 146, 147

13. This is very unique among the hours as well as the manuscripts.

14. These are the same psalms of the Eleventh Hour except for the first two (Psalms 116 and 117) which are prayed in the First Watch.

15. These are the same psalms of the Twelfth Hour.





## APPENDIX 2

<i>Hour</i>	<i>Theme/ Commemoration</i>	<i>Psalm Examples (LXX)/ Gospel (NKJV)</i>
First Hour/ (6 AM)	Theme: New day & a new life We commemorate the Resurrection of our God Jesus Christ	Psalm 62: "O God, my God, I will rise early unto You: for my soul has thirsted for You..."
Third Hour/ (9 AM)	Theme: Renew the Spirit within us and cleanse our hearts; make us ready. We commemorate 3 events: Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples (Prayer to the Holy Spirit) The hour which our Lord was condemned and tried by Pilate Ascension to the Heavens This hour is the beginning of Christ's suffering	Psalm 22: "You have anointed my head with oil..."
Sixth Hour/ (Noon)	Theme: The Cross saves; blessed are you when you suffer and are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Beatitudes gospel is read). We commemorate the Crucifixion of our Lord	Psalm 53: "Save me, O God, by Your name... For behold, God helped me and the Lord is the protector of my soul..."
Ninth Hour/ (3PM)	Theme: We pray that God may put to death our carnal lusts, accept our repentance when we cry out like the thief (Luke 23:42), and make us partakers of His grace, We commemorate the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross and the acceptance of Demas, the crucified right-hand thief	Psalm 109
Eleventh Hour/ (Sunset)	Theme: I have spent much of my life in sin; save me from the adversary and bring me back. Salvation at the 11th hour (it's never too late to repent)--recall parable of the vineyard workers and the prodigal son Time of prayer after a day's work (Christ went to rest but Simon followed him to have his mother-in-law healed; work is not done) We commemorate Christ taken down from the Cross and prepared for burial (anointed with spices and wrapped in linen)	Psalm 117



<i>Hour</i>	<i>Theme/ Commemoration</i>	<i>Psalm Examples (LXX)/ Gospel (NKJV)</i>
Twelfth Hour/ (Bedtime)	Theme: Repent now before it is too late! Judgement is approaching We commemorate the burial of Christ and Judgment Day	Luke 2:25-32: "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation..."
Prayer of the Veil	This is daily prayed by the monks and nuns for meditation and self-examination. It is also suitable for individual meditation and prayer. In this prayer, the Psalms and the Gospel from John, focuses on self-examination and fleeing the glory of the world, reminding the monk of his own flight from the world.	John 6:15-23: "And [Jesus] departed again into a mountain by Himself alone.."
Midnight Hour	Theme: Being Watchful through the night for your soul because of Christ's second coming We remember and commemorate the prayers of Christ at Gethsemane (3 watches), The three gospels of the watches with their themes are: (1) the 5 wise virgins and vigil, (2) the Sinful Woman and repentance, and (3) the wise steward and wise service for the Kingdom,.	