

## Catechism & Theology Course

Session II, Class IV

12/5/23

“If we keep vigil in church, David comes first, last and central. If early in the morning we want songs and hymns, first, last and central is David again. If we are occupied with the funeral solemnities of those who have fallen asleep, or if virgins sit at home and spin, David is first, last and central. O amazing wonder! Many who have made little progress in literature know the Psalter by heart. Nor is it only in cities and churches that David is famous; in the village market, in the desert, and in uninhabitable land, he excites the praise of God. In monasteries, among those holy choirs of angelic armies, David is first, last and central. In the convents of virgins, where are the communities of those who imitate Mary; in the deserts where there are men crucified to the world, who live their life in heaven with God, David is first, last and central. All other men at night are overcome by sleep. David alone is active, and gathering the servants of God into seraphic bands, he turns earth into heaven, and converts men into angels.”

- St. John Chrysostom

“When the Holy Spirit saw that the human race was guided only with difficulty toward virtue, and that, because of our inclination toward pleasure, we were neglectful of an upright life, what did He do? The delight of melody He mingled with the doctrines so that by the pleasantness and softness of the sound heard we might receive without perceiving it the benefit of the words, just as wise physicians who, when giving the fastidious rather bitter drugs to drink, frequently smear the cup with honey. Therefore, He devised for us these harmonious melodies of the Psalms, that they who are children in age, or even those who are youthful in disposition, might to all appearances chant but, in reality, become trained in soul. For never has any one of the many indifferent persons gone away easily holding in mind either an apostolic or prophetic message but they do chant the words of the Psalms, even in the home, and they spread them about in the market place, and if, perchance, someone becomes exceedingly wrathful, when he begins to be soothed by a Psalm, he departs with the wrath of his soul immediately lulled to sleep by means of the melody.”

- St. Basil the Great, *Homily X, 1; On Psalm I*

“Then He said to them, “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.”

- *The Gospel According to St. Luke 24:44*

“In the Psalms we praise God *through* the Word, Jesus Christ, *by* the words that God himself has given to us.”

- St. Anthony the Great

## **Praying the Psalms**

Psalm, mizmor: “something sung”; Called however, Tehilim “Praises” reflecting an insight into meaning of the work

The Psalms are the divinely-inspired songs of the People of Israel. They are traditionally called the “psalms of David,” although many of them most certainly come from other authors of much later times. The enumeration and the wording of the psalms differ in various scriptural traditions. The Orthodox Church follows the Septuagint version of the psalter and for this reason the numbers and not seldom the texts of certain psalms are different in Orthodox service books from what they are in the Bibles which are translated from the Hebrew.

The psalms of the Bible were composed, with divine inspiration, during the rich and high culture approximately twenty-five hundred years ago. This sacred poetry of praise and lamentation was hewn by the ancient Hebrew people from their own intense experience; it is a poetry of the human heart in the midst of triumph, desolation, and the ordinary affairs of life. The psalms have been used continuously down through the ages since those times and have been translated into most languages, ancient and modern. In whatever tongue, they partake of and effect the Holy Spirit's Pentecost for the whole world.

## **Historical Background**

- Both Jewish and Christian tradition made it part of daily and weekly liturgy
- Origins intricately rooted in the ancient Near Eastern world going back to the Bronze Age
- Stylistic and even thematic roots and poetic force found in antecedent literature dating back to 1400-1200
- Writing/composition of the Psalms was a persistent activity over many centuries
- Many, though not all Psalms by David (given the epithet in Samuel: “the sweet singer of Israel”)-;the Late Biblical period often ascribed to famous figures of the past

The Old Testament book that contains hymns and poems traditionally ascribed to the Holy Prophet and King David, ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ. Virtually every aspect of worship—praise, thanksgiving, penitence, intercession—is covered in the Psalter.

- Certainly some Psalms from as late as 457 B.C. (i.e. see Psalm 137: “by Babylon’s streams”- written after national trauma of exile and now return to Zion
- Scrolls of Qumran indicate possibility of some Psalms being composed even later into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., however, the Septuagint being collected in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. undoes this
- Psalms regardless produced by many different poets and over more than half a millennium going back before the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
- Mentioned in Luke 24:44 as one of the three primary categories of sacred writing, along with the Torah and the Prophets

- Though not originally in Temple use (as instructed in Leviticus), early liturgical use is seen in some texts, i.e. Psalm 118
- Earliest use of Psalms for personal prayer, repentance, and thanksgiving

## Assembly

The book of Psalms (Psalter) in the Old Testament consists of 150 psalms. It contains divinely-inspired hymns and poems traditionally ascribed to the Holy Prophet and King David, although many were authored by others such as Moses and temple musicians. The Psalms are the prayer-book of the Church and are used in services more than any other book of Holy Scripture. They form the core of each of the services of the Daily Cycle and the Divine Liturgy.

- Anthology that became book of Psalms put together in the Second Temple period, perhaps the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
- Editors included priestly circles in Jerusalem
- Canonical collection is divided into five books: 1-42, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150; clearly meant to mirror the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch)
- The Septuagint (LXX) is the version of the Old Testament used by the Orthodox Church. The LXX Psalter differs in several respects from Masoretic text (MT), which forms the basis for the King James Version and most modern English translations of the Bible. In addition to substantive, textual differences, the LXX and MT versions of the Psalter differ most obviously in their chapter divisions. This can cause confusion to readers who do not understand the differences between the two versions:

### Numbering of the Psalms

Septuagint (Greek)	Hebrew (KJ)
1-8	1-8
9	9-10
10-122	11-113
113	114-115
114	116 v. 1-9
115	116 v. 10-19
116-145	117-146
146	147 v. 1-11
147	147 v. 12-20
148-150	148-150

## THE Subject: Christ in the Psalms

Every word in the Psalter is about God, it's about Jesus Christ who is God and man, it's about man, it's about humanity, and it's about every single one of us.

In the Orthodox Church all of the psalms are understood as having their deepest and most genuine spiritual meaning in terms of Christ and His mission of eternal salvation. Thus, for example, the psalms which refer to the king are sung in the Church in reference to Christ's exaltation and glorification at the right hand of God. The psalms which refer to Israel's deliverance are sung in reference to Christ's redemption of the whole world. The psalms calling for victory over the enemies in battle refer to the only real Enemy, the devil, and all of his wicked works which Christ has come to destroy. Babylon thus signifies the realm of Satan, and Jerusalem, the eternal Kingdom of God. The psalms which lament the innocent suffering of the righteous are sung as the plea of the Lord Himself and all those with Him who are the "poor and needy" who will rise up to rule the earth on the day of God's terrible judgment. Thus, the psalter remains forever as the divinely-inspired song book of prayer and worship for all of God's People, and most especially for those who belong to the Messiah whose words the psalms are in their deepest and most divine significance.

- There is a canonical unity to the Scriptures, a *scopos*. The basis and principle of this is understood through the *ekklesia*, the congregation that preexisted the canon
- Theologically, all the words that apply to God are applied to the man Jesus. And that is a Christian conviction, because in the New Covenant, absolutely everything that was applied to God in the Old Testament is applied to the man Jesus in the New Testament. This *is* the Gospel. This is the Gospel, that that man, Jesus, is God, and doing the work of his Father, who is God, in the midst of the earth in human form. (i.e. Psalm 1 says: "Blessed is the *man*," and it's *man*, male man. It's not *anthrōpos*; it's not "human being." It's *anēr*: *Makarios anēr*—blessed is the male human being, who walks not in the counsel of [the ungodly], who sits not with the scoffers, who doesn't go in the way of sinners, who keeps all the commandments of God." And that man is Jesus. That man is Jesus.
- The psalms are sung with Christ in mind, with Christ in *heart*. They're sung with what St. Paul would call "the *mind* of Christ," and therefore every single word of the Bible, every single word of the psalms, every psalm taken together, understanding what it's about, is understood by Christians to refer to Jesus Christ.

### **Liturgical Use: For Prayer**

The Psalms serve many functions: foretelling coming events; recalling history; giving laws for life; revealing what must be done to obey God's word; and helping to overcome passions that exercise dominion over our souls. All states of a person standing before God, and virtually every aspect of worship, is expressed in the psalms: praising, thanking, blessing, rejoicing, interceding, petitioning, repenting, lamenting, questioning, and even complaining. The psalms use the power of poetic expression and melody to capture and gradually transform our thoughts.

They provide serenity and peace, soften the soul's wrath, form friendships, unite those separated and help us in our trials, temptations and tribulations. St Arsenios of Cappadocia referred to psalms that assist in specific circumstances: Psalm 3 to help malice leave a person; Psalm 22 to ask God to tame disobedient children; Psalm 38 to help with troublemakers; Psalm 55 to help people who are extremely sensitive and have been psychologically and emotionally scarred by other people. The psalms have such a powerful effect on the soul and are so integral to our lives that St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain encouraged the faithful to Psalmody in our heart the

spiritual songs of the Church wherever we may be: at our home, where we work, where we walk, and everywhere else.

- A *dialogos* or conversation, giving us words of prayer
- Voice of the Psalms is “I” and “we”

In the Lenten season, the reading of the psalms is doubled in monasteries. *More* psalms are sung. *More* are added to the service, so that people would just, as St. Seraphim of Sarov said, “swim around in the psalms like fish in the water; that’s where we belong.” Or St. Athanasius, in his little letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms: “The Psalms are like a great meadow, a flower garden where there’s all these different flowers where you go around and you smell this one and you smell that one. Or like a symphony of different sounds that anticipate every aspect of human life.” And so in the Psalms you *have* every aspect of human life. You have questioning of God, lamentation before God. You have grieving before God. You have repenting before God. You have praising God, thanking God, glorifying God. At morning and evening and noonday. All of that is in the Psalter.

- The most often quoted book in the NT
- Used in the daily services of Orthros, Third Hour, Compline, and at every Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church.
- The use of the Psalms/Psalter was central to worship and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church.
- Within the liturgical life of the Church, the Book of Psalms is by far the most frequently quoted book in the Bible. All of our services are saturated with the Psalms, whether with a verse here or there, or with entire psalm passages.

The entire Psalter is appointed to be read through once every week (twice during the weeks of Great Lent). In order to do this, the entire 150 Psalms are divided up into 20 *kathismata*, and each *kathisma* into three sections, as following the numeration of the Psalms in the Septuagint or Greek Psalter):

<i>Kathisma</i> 1: Psalms 1-3, 4-6, 7-8	<i>Kathisma</i> 11: 77, 78-80, 81-84
<i>Kathisma</i> 2: 9-10, 11-13, 14-16	<i>Kathisma</i> 12: 85-87, 88, 89-90
<i>Kathisma</i> 3: 17, 18-20, 21-23	<i>Kathisma</i> 13: 91-93, 94-96, 97-100
<i>Kathisma</i> 4: 24-26, 27-29, 30-31	<i>Kathisma</i> 14: 101-102, 103, 104
<i>Kathisma</i> 5: 32-33, 34-35, 36	<i>Kathisma</i> 15: 106, 107-108
<i>Kathisma</i> 6: 37-39, 40-42, 43-45	<i>Kathisma</i> 16: 109-111, 112-114, 115-117
<i>Kathisma</i> 7: 40-48, 49-50, 51-54	<i>Kathisma</i> 17: 118:1-72, 73-131, 132-176
<i>Kathisma</i> 8: 55-57, 58-60, 61-63	<i>Kathisma</i> 18: 119-123, 124-128, 129-133
<i>Kathisma</i> 9: 64-66, 67, 68-69	<i>Kathisma</i> 19: 134-136, 137-139, 140-142
<i>Kathisma</i> 10: 70-71, 72-73, 74-76	<i>Kathisma</i> 20: 143-144, 145,147, 148-150

The weekly reading of the Psalter begins with the Vespers of Saturday, when new weekly cycle of the Octoechos is begun. At Saturday Vespers the first *kathisma* sung (not read, as will he

explained in a later chapter), and at Sunday Matins the second and third kathismata are read. For the rest of the week three kathismata are read daily, as follows:

Monday: Kathismata 4, 5, 6

Tuesday: Kathismata 7, 8, 9

Wednesday: Kathismata 10, 11, 12

Thursday: Kathismata 13, 14, 15

Friday: Kathismata 19, 20, 18

Saturday: Kathismata 16, 17, 1

Generally, the first two kathismata appointed each day are read at Matins, and the third kathisma at Vespers. At the Vespers of Sundays and great feasts no kathisma is read, as the Typicon says, "due to the labor of the vigil" which has preceded.