

THROUGH THE PSALTER IN GREAT LENT



**DAILY PSALTER DEVOTIONS FOR
THE SEASON OF GREAT LENT**

How to use this booklet:

The Ascetic Fathers speak of 'prayer and psalmody' almost always as a pair. If we wish to be guided by these holy fathers in our own ascetic disciplines during the season of Great Lent, we can do no better than to immerse ourselves in the Psalter. The monks imagine no life of prayer apart from the constant reading, singing, and praying of the Psalter.

This booklet is organized as a help to those who wish to enter into the discipline of Psalmody this Great Lent. In the spirit of St. Benedict of Nursia, the Archimandrite of the Romans, I seek to introduce "nothing too strict." Orthodox Tradition for the season of Great Lent is very intense, calling for the reading of nearly 50 Psalms per day. This booklet assumes that Christians will read only one Kathisma (usually about 9 Psalms) every two days. Ideally, you will read these Psalms on both days, but you may split them up if necessary. By the end of Great Lent, you will have read the entire Psalter at least once (twice if you read each Kathisma in its entirety on the assigned days).

May this booklet be a help to you as you journey with the Fathers and all the Church this Great Lent. May it also kindle in you a deep and abiding love for the Psalter, which is truly the hymnal and prayerbook of the Christian Church.

Marc B. Paine



*By your ascetic labors, God-bearing
Benedict,*

You were proven to be true to your name.

For you were the son of benediction,

*And became a rule and model for all who
emulate your life and cry:*

'Glory to Him who gave you strength!

Glory to Him who granted you a crown!

*Glory to Him who through you grants
healing to all!"*

(Troparion to St. Benedict of Nursia)

Fall and Rise

Third Monday in Great Lent

Kathisma 7 (Psalms 46-54)

"It is for this reason that we often read and chant this Psalm in the Church: that they that have not fallen might take heed, lest they fall, and that they that have fallen might take heed, that they may rise."
St. Augustine of Hippo on Psalm 50

What is the value of Psalm 50? It is easily the most recognizable Psalm of repentance. We say or hear the words frequently enough. St. Augustine of Hippo says that there are two good reasons to saturate our lives with this Psalm.

The Psalm was written, as the superscription says, to express David's repentance when the prophet Nathan was sent to him. David, you see, had been a very bad boy, indeed. He had seen a woman bathing who was not his wife, and he had desired her. She was the wife of one of his generals. David went to her, and soon she was with child. David tried to cover up his sin by tricking her husband into taking a vacation from war. He figured that if she and her husband lay together early enough, nobody might be able to do the math. When that didn't work, he arranged for her husband to be killed in battle, then he married her.

Well, God wasn't very happy with David. He sent the prophet Nathan to confront David. Now here is the watershed moment that St. Augustine speaks about: what do you do when you are confronted with your sin? David had already tried covering it up. Now it was out in the open. He could have been angry and defensive and had the prophet killed (he wouldn't have been the first to kill the messenger). Instead, David admitted his sin. He wept bitterly and acknowledged that God was right to judge him.

That is why St. Augustine says we use this Psalm so much. It teaches us the proper response of one of God's people when He catches us in our sin. We acknowledge our sin, confess it before the Lord, and declare Him just and right in His condemnation. We throw ourselves on His mercy and, though there may be consequences, we move forward with Him in a continuing relationship. That's what David did. The baby born of his sinful union died. That was a consequence, and it hurt David deeply, but God had not abandoned David. He had not taken from David his Holy Spirit (as He had with Saul before David). Life would go on. Having fallen, David rose again.

In temptation, you may also meditate on this Psalm. Hear the anguish in the words and think of the consequences, and "take heed, lest you fall."

Taking Sides

Third Tuesday in Great Lent

Kathisma 7 (Psalms 46-54)

"Thou hast loved evil more than goodness, unrighteousness more than to speak righteousness. Thou has loved all the words of engulfing ruin, and a deceitful tongue." (Psalm 51)

Like so many of the Psalms inspired by events in David's life, this one also has a story behind it. King Saul was jealous of David and his relationship with David had become poisoned. He wanted to kill David, but Saul's son, Jonathan, was David's best friend. Jonathan warned David one night that his father, King Saul, meant to kill David.

In a rush, David fled from King Saul. He went to the priest, Abiathar, and asked for supplies. Abiathar thought it was awfully suspicious that David would be so desperate, but David told him that he was on an urgent mission and needed food and a sword. Abiathar gave David the shewbread from before the Lord (which only the priests were to eat) and the sword of Goliath, whom David had slain.

This story may be familiar to you, but a lesser known person was also present: Doek the Idumean. Doek was an humble servant of King Saul, a keeper of sheep, but he witnessed David's encounter with Abiathar. When King Saul was angry that David had escaped him, Doek stepped forward and tattled. He thought King Saul would reward him for his information, so he betrayed David and the priest.

King Saul called Abiathar and many other priests to himself, and there he commanded the soldiers to slay them for taking sides with David. The soldiers refused because they feared God and didn't want to kill His priests, but Doek saw more opportunity here. He slew them all.

That is what this Psalm is about: Doek used his mouth to do evil. He used words to condemn men to death. He didn't tell any lies, but he did speak about things he had no business speaking about. Why? Because he thought it would get him ahead. Doek is a classic back-stabber. He "loved the words of engulfing ruin." He enjoyed doing damage with his words. Doek did it because he thought it would bring him earthly benefits. Doek thought that King Saul's pleasure was worth more than God's pleasure.

Silence is an important discipline. It isn't only lying that we have to avoid. Doek spoke the truth, but the truth he spoke was ruinous. Even though he spoke the truth, it caused a lot of damage, and all because he didn't mind his own business. He spoke a destructive truth in search of personal reward. A righteous man will laugh at such a person and say: "this is the man who strengthened himself in vanity."

Mighty Deeds

Third Wednesday in Great Lent

Kathisma 8 (Psalms 55-63)

*"In God we shall work mighty deeds, and He will bring to naught them that afflict us."
(Psalm 59)*

The People of God had been on the retreat. It was you versus the world, and the world was winning. God had cast you off. He had destroyed you. He had been angry and filled with wrath, but He also had pity on you. The Psalm says that God had "shown His people hard things, and made them to drink the wine of contrition."

But now things are about to start turning around. Why? Look at those words above: pity, contrition. The Lord had been driving His people to contrition, that is, to sorrow over their sins. That is usually where things start turning around.

This is one of the reasons we discipline ourselves during Great Lent. It isn't as a way of enduring hard things, but rather so that this pivotal point where things turn around becomes clearer to us. That is what the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord is. It is the most radical pivot imaginable, where all the hard things that have ever come upon Mankind suddenly start to turn around.

Great Lent is a season of preparation. It is a time for us to prepare for Pascha, for the sudden shift from losing to winning, from dying to living, from defeat to victory. The Psalmist commemorates that sudden change in the life of God's People – the change from living in defeat to suddenly turning and conquering their enemies, razing their cities, and emerging the victors! That is what we experience in our death and resurrection in Christ in Holy Baptism, and Great Lent is a time of preparation for Holy Baptism.

For those of us who are not catechumens, but are already baptized, what is the purpose of such preparation? Look at the Psalm. "Wilt Thou not, O God, go forth with our forces?" The answer from the superscription of this Psalm is, "Yes." We prepare for war – a war we cannot lose, because God Himself is in our midst.

"In God we shall work mighty deeds!" writes the Psalmist. Prepare for that. Prepare to work mighty deeds. Whether catechumen or baptized faithful, the Church is arrayed for war. Our enemies are sin, the devils, and even Death. Their defeat is a foregone conclusion, but by every evidence, the enemies of God's People are still at large, still exercising their power. The time of retreat is over. It is time to go on the offensive! "In God we shall work mighty deeds, and He will bring to naught them that afflict us!"

The Way Up is Down

Third Thursday in Great Lent

Kathisma 8 (Psalms 55-63)

“But be subject unto God, O my soul, for from Him is my patient endurance. For He is my God and my helper, and I shall not be moved from hence.”
(Psalm 61)

This is a Psalm of David concerning “Idithun.” What is “Idithun?” St. Augustine comments on the meaning of the word: “one who leaps up.” He says that there are those who climb the steps one at a time, and then there are the Idithun, or those who leap several steps in a bound.

So this entire Psalm is about not only the way to ascend, but to even leap the steps of ascent by bounds. And what is that way of rapid ascent? What is the principle of this speedy climb? It is submission and patience and endurance and humility. The way up is down.

The Psalm begins by commending the subjection of the soul to God. After all, it says, He is your salvation. Then the Psalmist writes something that appears not once, but twice in the Psalm: “For He is my God, my saviour and my helper.” In both appearances of this verse, the consequence of God's salvation and help is that the one who ascends the ladder need not fear being shaken loose from it, or losing his place.

How will we ascend to the heavens? Only by lowering ourselves before the Lord. If we try to lift ourselves up or ascend directly, as did that old serpent, the Devil, will He not humble every one that exalts himself? (Matt. 23:12) And the Theotokos sang in the Spirit: “He casts down the mighty from the thrones and lifts up the lowly.” (Luke 1:52)

This is the mystery of the cross of Christ, who said to His holy Apostles: “whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26-28)

Great Lent is a time for God's People to ascend by lowliness and submission. Hear the Psalmist's exhortation to the congregation of God's People: pour out your hearts before Him, for God is our helper. Do not set your heart on men, or those who do injustice, and do not set your hearts on riches. Instead, give alms. Do justice. Be merciful and serve others. Find the lowest place and become a slave of God. Is that not what we say when we go to the Eucharist? The servant of God...? The handmaiden of God...? When we live in those words, we not only ascend to the Lord, but the Psalmist and St. Augustine say that we take the steps two at a time.

So Close You Can Taste It

Third Friday in Great Lent

Kathisma 9 (Psalms 64-69)

“We shall be filled with the good things of Thy house; holy is Thy temple, wonderful in righteousness... Thou shalt bless the crown of the year with Thy goodness, and Thy plains shall be filled with fatness.”
(Psalm 64)

This Psalm might look at first glance like any other Psalm that praises the Lord for His goodness in the face of some bounty or at receiving good things from His hand. Look at the superscription and you'll see what makes this one special: this Psalm was inspired by one of the worst events in the history of God's People: the deportation into Babylon.

God's People had been unfaithful, and as a result He sent the Babylonian Empire to conquer them. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple, forced God's People to leave their homeland, and even forbade the use of their language. This was probably the harshest discipline God ever visited upon His People.

That is what makes this Psalm so amazing: in the midst of a present that is about as bad as it gets, the Psalmist looks forward to a time of future blessing. It is a gracious gift from the Lord that enables one of His people to see beyond his present situation and participate by faith in a promised time of future bounty. This is “anticipation.”

“We also ought to know first our captivity, then our deliverance: we ought to know the Babylon wherein we are captives, and the Jerusalem for which we long to return with sighing,” writes St. Augustine. This is an important part of our Lenten practice. We remember that this is not our home, that we are pilgrims and sojourners, that with holy Abraham we long for “a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is the Lord.” (Hebrews 11:10)

Great Lent is a time to experience, by faith, an anticipatory fulfillment of God's promises of future bounty. Even while we eat simple fare, we anticipate the Day of the Lord, when He will bless the land with fatness. In the midst of this pilgrim life of captivity, the Lord Jesus brings us the fullness of His Kingdom, a Kingdom that is both now and not yet.

You may look at circumstances and feel like you're on the verge of losing everything, just like the circumstances that inspired this Psalm. But faith enables you to sing this Psalm before its time – to rejoice in a bounty that seems so far away and yet so close you can taste it. This is what we participate in mysteriously every Sunday (Day of the Lord) in the Liturgy: freedom and bounty invading and conquering captivity and suffering.

Listening for Sirens

Third Saturday in Great Lent

Kathisma 9 (Psalms 64-69)

*“Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Him flee before His face... And let the righteous be glad; let them rejoice in the presence of God, let them delight in gladness.”
(Psalm 67)*

Imagine that there is an armed robbery happening. One person holds another at gunpoint, threatening him and demanding that he hand over his valuables. Suddenly, the blare of police sirens explodes on the scene and lights blaze on the situation. One sudden appearance but two very different reactions to it. If you are the man holding the gun, threatening a victim with violence and mistreating him, the lights and sirens of the police' sudden appearance is a cause for terror. If you are the man held at gunpoint, being threatened and victimized, the very same lights and sirens fill you with hope and a flood of relief.

This is what happens in Psalm 67 when God arises. His enemies scatter. The law-breakers flee from Him in terror. On the other hand, the righteous are glad when God arises. They rejoice before the lights and sounds of God's marvelous appearance. Delight and gladness burst forth from the righteous at the appearance of the Lord.

Why the different reactions to the sirens? It all depends on what part you are playing when they sound. The same thing is true when the Lord arises. Those who are the enemies of God and His People are filled with fear and flee. Sinners perish in His presence. On the other hand, those who are waiting for the Lord's salvation are filled with gladness and rejoicing. It is a worthy discipline, often commended by the Fathers, to keep always in mind the glorious appearance of the Lord, considering whether you would flee in fear as one guilty or rejoice as one whose hope has manifest.

Keep all of this in mind tomorrow as you participate in the work of God's People, the Divine Liturgy. In the Eucharist, the Lord comes to us in the Mystery. Let God's enemies be scattered at His coming, but let those who hope in Him draw near. St. Augustine comments that in Psalm 2 the Psalmist speaks of that rejoicing which every mortal who lives in this passing age rejoices as “with trembling,” but in the Divine Liturgy we “lay aside all earthly cares,” and are invited to join with all the choirs of Heaven, not as those who belong to this passing age, but the eternal Kingdom. For this reason, the Psalmist does not in this Psalm speak of “rejoicing with trembling,” but “rejoicing with delight.” Let God arise!

Nothing but Christ – Crucified

Sunday of the Holy Cross

“Learn to prefer nothing to Christ... to dash every temptation against the Rock that is Christ.” St. Benedict of Nursia

As Christians, we wear crosses. We make the sign of the cross like a million times during the Liturgy. We venerate and kiss the cross. We receive our blessings under the cross. The cross seems to be everywhere!

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation: “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2) It seems a very strange thing to resolve, considering the message of the resurrection, the days with the disciples, the ascent into Heaven, and the glorious return in judgment on the Last Day. Wouldn't have been better to resolve to know nothing but the Incarnate Christ? Or maybe the Risen Christ? Christ the Victor?

There is something very special about the message of the cross, though. It is foolishness. It is weakness and mystery. On the cross we see a dead king, crowned with thorns, and somehow we confess: “This is my King and my God!” How does this upside-down, backward message ever come to anything?! Because it is the power and the wisdom of God.

Standing before the cross of Christ we see for ourselves that God's ways are not our ways. Nowhere is that clearer than before the Holy Cross. If men were imagining their own god, he would be powerful beyond imagining. He would be just and good to be sure, but also glorious and mighty. He would be arrayed in might and surrounded by riches. He would grant boons to those who serve him.

That is why the Holy Cross is the destroyer of all idols. All false gods are brought to nothing before the cross. Here is the true God Almighty! He is nearly the exact opposite of any god we would fashion for ourselves. He is weak, defeated, afflicted, and dead. He is humble and submissive. His crown is made of thorns. He is surrounded by enemies who mock instead of adoring crowds who cheer. The boon He grants His followers is that of martyrdom.

Here is Wisdom! Here is the Power of God! By means of His cross, Christ has cast down every idol and dashed every vain spiritual imagining of mankind. By means of a tree, the Son of Man has defeated him who once before by means of a tree had defeated man.

“Save, O Lord, Thy people and bless Thine inheritance; grant Thou unto the faithful victory over adversaries. And by the power of Thy Cross do Thou preserve Thy commonwealth.”

- Apolytikion of the Holy Cross