

Praying the Psalms

Praying the psalms is a worship that can be traced back as early as the start of the Christian faith and it was a continuation and extension of the worship of the Jews. The first Christian groups worshipped in the temple in the same way the Jews worshipped. According to historians, like Philo the Jew, Jesus used to pray the psalms with His disciples during His life on earth. In the book of Acts, we read: 'Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour' (Acts 3:1). We also read: 'The next day, as they went on their journey and drew near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour' (Acts 10:9). So, this prayer of the hours using the psalms continued and extended in the early church.

The early fathers of the Church had a very close relationship with the Scriptures. For them, each book of the scripture had a unique focus and purpose. There are prophetic books, historical books and so on. They considered the book of Psalms to be a book of worship given by the Holy Spirit to God's people, both in the Old and New Testaments. They believed that praying the psalms fills the person with the anointing of worship and so they prayed them every day. They believed the psalms should be used as the foundation with which one starts worship and so they started their prayer with them.

The psalms in the life of the early fathers

- **Praying the psalms is the manna for the spirit**

Though we always try to worship from all our hearts, we often pray by our minds but not in the spirit. In order for the spirit to be in harmony with the mind in worship, the spirit needs to be given its special food that would strengthen and revive it. The book of Psalms is food for the spirit; it is the manna for the spirit.

According to the early fathers, the psalms are the manna of the new Israel. The manna sustained the old Israel for 40 years in the desert; it was not only a physical food that nourished their bodies, but it also sustained them spiritually. While feeding on the manna, Israel never lost a battle. Those who got bored of the manna in the desert brought problems to Israel as they thought of going back to Egypt; they never tasted the mystical aspect of the

manna. The book of Psalms, being the main book of Prayer that God gave to His people, should be prayed regularly as we need to nourish on the heavenly manna.

Though some may think that repeating the psalms everyday would make it a boring routine, the early fathers argue that God had fed Israel the manna in the wilderness every day. It was the same kind of food for 40 years; God did not change it! Therefore, the words that one says do not make prayer a routine, but the spirit in which they are said is what matters. Using the psalms everyday gives the person a chance to use the Word of God in worship. This is the food of the Spirit.

However, the early fathers believed that praying the psalms alone is not enough; the psalms are just an introduction so that one would continue to pray and worship in the Spirit. One should start the prayer time with the psalms in order to strengthen his soul and then he should continue his prayer time with the prayer of 'the unveiled face', which is the free prayer: 'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2Corinthians 3:18). Therefore, the purpose of free prayers is to behold God's face so that we may be transformed into His image. This can never happen unless the spirit is strengthened and is growing.

- **Praying the psalms daily helps us in developing a disciplined spiritual life**

Praying the psalms is a spiritual preparation for free prayer. Yet, it takes time and diligence to do this preparation. If one is truly hungry for the glory of God and accepts to go through the path of spiritual discipline humbly and consistently, he will be entrusted with all the treasures of heaven. The Lord wants to give us all He has: 'And the Lord said, who then is that faithful and wise steward whom his lord shall set over his house servants, to give them their portion of food in season? Blessed is that servant when his lord comes and finds him so doing. Truly I say to you that he will set him over all his possessions' (Luke 12:41-44)

- **Praying the psalms has a spiritual cleansing effect**

We often struggle to discern matters and receive the right direction and guidance of the Spirit. This is because we often move from one day to the other without shaking off the dust of the previous day. The psalms are like a spiritual shower that washes the mind and the soul.

Reading and praying the Word of God clears the mind and the soul; the spirit is refreshed and ready to communicate with God and be a sensitive receptor.

- **Praying the psalms strengthens a frail soul**

The human soul has become frail due to the fall. As a result, one may be happy and at peace; yet as soon as something negative happens or is said, he feels depressed; he continues to swing from encouragement to dismay. We need to gird ourselves and deal with this jellylike soul because this frailty affects the spirit. We may be cut off from the sanctifying stream of the Spirit and it is our responsibility to dig the riverbed to allow the flow of the sanctifying water; this can be done by praying the psalms.

Prostration, while praying the psalms, helps the soul to be girded, awake and watchful. We should use all the human elements (soul, mind, spirit, and body) in prayer: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Romans 12:1).

- **Praying the psalms tears the veil**

True prayer is a transforming experience; each time we encounter His presence, we should be transformed: 'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord' (2Corinthians 3:18).

Do we experience this transformation every time we enter into His Presence? The veil has been removed; yet it gets formed again. One of the most important results of praying the psalms is tearing the veil.

Monastic life in Egypt in the early centuries & praying the psalms

In the first four centuries, there were two groups of worshippers in Egypt who prayed the psalms. One group was in Wadi El Natroun and they were advanced in spiritual life; while the other group called 'Pachomius communal monastic life' was in the south of Egypt where worshippers joined as beginners in the faith. Accordingly, two different ways of using the psalms were set.

Worshippers in the area of Wadi El Natroun used to pray the 150 psalm every day. Those worshippers were able to spend long hours in prayer. They prayed all day according to the verse that says 'I am prayer' (Psalm 109:4). Nowadays, we hear about the 24hour prayer watch being divided among a group of people. The early fathers believed that the 24 hour is the responsibility of one person as Jesus said that 'men always ought to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1). Yet, this does not mean that they did not sleep at all. The spiritually advanced worshippers used to sleep two hours a day. Because of the continuous long hours of prayer, the worshiper finds himself praying the psalms over and over during his sleep. Not every one used to sleep two hours; this only applied to the worshippers who were advanced in the spirit. The usual hours of sleep were four hours where the rest of the time was spent in prayer and work as they had to support themselves financially. They learned to pray while doing their work so that their minds would continue thinking of God. While working, they either repeated certain verses from the bible or called on the name of Jesus by repeating phrases like 'Lord Jesus Christ help me/sanctify me/have mercy on me.'

The other group, Pachomius community, was given selected psalms to pray since they were beginners. These selected psalms were collected in the book of 'Agbia' or the book of the hours of prayer. This book contains half the psalms and also the shorter ones.

The book of Agbia

The book of Agbia is divided into seven hours of prayer based on the words of the Scripture: 'seven times a day I praise you' (Psalm 119:164). The prayers are centered on the acts of Christ's salvation.

- The first hour which is usually prayed at six o'clock in the morning is related to the resurrection of Christ, which had taken place in the early hours of the morning.
- The third hour of prayer which is at nine o'clock in the morning is centered on the pouring of the Holy Spirit because the Scriptures tell us that this is the hour when the Holy Spirit was poured on the disciples.
- The prayers of the sixth hour which is at noon focus on the crucifixion of Christ because the crucifixion took place at this hour, as mentioned in the Scriptures.

- The ninth hour of prayer which is at three o'clock in the afternoon focuses on Jesus giving His last breath –this is linked to a special spiritual truth when Jesus said: “it is finished” (John 19:30). The psalms chosen for this hour of prayer are songs of worship and praise (Psalms 95-100). After having prayed the sixth hour asking for help from the crucified Christ, the worshiper realizes his joy because of the words of Jesus (“it is finished”); these words imply that the person’s joy is complete and his salvation is eternal.
- The following hour of prayer is at five o'clock in the evening. This is the time when Jesus was brought down from the cross and was supposed to be buried with the evil doers as in the prophecy of Isaiah; yet Joseph of Aramathia has changed this and took Jesus and buried Him in a new grave.
- The following hour is at six o'clock in the evening. It is the end of the day and so one reminds oneself that his life may end any minute. The early fathers liked to remind themselves of the end of their lives because this helps one to always have the fear of God in his heart. Nowadays, we do not like to remember this moment arguing that this is a negative thinking; yet, this has caused us to lose the fear of God!
- The last hour of prayer is at midnight. The early Church awaited and expected Christ’s second coming as the bridegroom of midnight, as written in Matthew 25; and so the psalms of this hour of prayer focus on this matter.

Each hour of prayer consists of twelve psalms centered on the event or act of salvation related to the hour. However, the reference to the event may not always be direct; it is sometimes indirect.

After the psalms, there is a Gospel reading related to the event; this is also sometimes direct and at other times is indirect. In the prayer of the third hour, the Gospel reading is about the pouring of the Holy Spirit which is directly related to the focus of this hour of prayer. However the Gospel reading of the sixth hour is from the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes –which seem unrelated to the crucifixion which is the theme of this hour of prayer. However, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount can never be lived or applied unless one’s life is fixed on the crucifixion of Christ.

The Gospel reading is followed by short prayer passages chosen from some early writings. The early fathers of the Church –who lived in Wadi-El-Natroun and prayed the 150 psalms –did not recite the psalms one after the other. They actually prayed some psalms and then paused for

some time to pray their own prayers. These phrases that they prayed between the verses were left for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Since some of these prayers were said by spiritual fathers who were mature and advanced in the spirit, their disciples wrote them down or sometimes they memorized them so that they would use them in their prayers too. Not all of the prayers were repeated because many of the prayers were said spontaneously between the verses; but only some were recorded and repeated. When the book of Agbia was being prepared for beginners, certain passages of prayers that were prayed by the advanced spiritual fathers were chosen to guide and help beginners in prayer. In later centuries, other passages were added leaving the book with some unauthentic passages that are new additions.

After these passages, the early fathers prayed asking for God's mercy. They did so by repeating phrases like: 'Lord, have mercy on us', which are repeated 41 times. The number 41 reminds us of the passion of Christ: 39 lashes and the crown of thorns and nails. In doing so, they were proclaiming that the passions and sufferings of Christ are because of their sins; yet at the same time these sufferings and passions have become the source of their power and strength.

This is followed by a summary or conclusion at the end of each hour under the title 'absolution'. This word has certain significance. In 1John 3:8c, we read: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested that He might destroy the works of the devil.' In its Greek origin, the word 'destroy' means 'dissolve'. The word 'absolution' is derived from 'dissolve' or 'absolve' implying that when one prays the prayers that are centered on the crucifixion of Christ and His redemption, everything related to sin in that person is dissolved and absolved. Accordingly, one concludes the prayer giving thanks to the Lord for this.

The early fathers used to hold a cross while praying the psalms. In holding the cross, they were proclaiming that the cross is the source of their redemption and salvation and that their prayers would be in vain without the cross. They also used to declare their love for the cross by holding it and kissing it.

Prostration

After praying each psalm, the early fathers used to prostrate. The word 'prostration', according to the original Hebrew language, signifies bowing down until the forehead touches the ground

(Revelation 4:8-10; Revelation 5:14; Revelation 11:16). The Hebrew equivalent, used in the Old Testament, for the word 'worship' literally means: to bow down with the forehead to the ground.

Prostration, according to the early fathers, is a complete worship in itself which they valued greatly. They often made several prostrations together with few words of prayer as a kind of worship. They derived their understanding about prostration from the following biblical principles:

- ***Prostration is a heavenly worship; it is the way angels worship God (Revelation 7:11; Revelation 11:16)***

The heavenly worship, as clear in the book of Revelation, consists of two main components: 'praise' and 'prostration'. When the angels bow before the Lord, their forehead touches the ground: 'All the angles were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures they fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying amen' (Revelation 7:11). We also read: 'and the twenty four elders who were seated on the throne before God fell on their faces and worshipped God' (Revelation 11:16). Therefore, the early fathers believed that bowing before the Lord is the way of worship that will continue in heaven and so we should learn it while we are here on earth as it is written: 'on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10).

There is an important biblical mystery regarding the ministry of the angels which the early fathers understood; and hence were keen on worship by prostrating before the Lord.

The angels worship God through repeated phrases that do not change. They worship by repeating phrases like: 'holy, holy, holy' together with prostrations. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews reveals this matter to us clearly when he speaks about the ministry of the angels: '*Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?*' (Hebrews 1:14)

In the above verse we notice that two words are used to refer to the ministry of the angels. In the original Greek language these are two different words that have different meanings: 'liturgia' which means 'liturgy' and 'diakonia' from which the word 'deacon' is derived.

Apostle Paul uses the word “liturgia” when he speaks about the ministry of the angels in the Holies before God; while he uses the word “diakonia” when he speaks about the angels’ ministry to people aiding them in certain matters or bringing to them messages from God.

“Diakonia” implies a change in the kind of ministry according to the need; while “liturgia” is the exact opposite; it signifies that the words used in such ministry are always the same and they do not change. When the angels serve God they offer a kind of ministry which is different from when they serve people.

God is not pleased with words and expressions, but is rather pleased with the heart and the fellowship of worship. The first Church considered the ministry of the angels to God an indicator of God’s desire of the manner of worship. Therefore, the early Church has put the first liturgies based on this understanding. This was also the essence of using the word ‘liturgy’ to describe the worship of the first Church where they used words and prayers which they repeated week after the other in the believers’ meetings. Yet, the emphasis was always on the state of the heart.

On the other hand, when we minister to human beings, we need inspiration. There should be a change in the ministry according to the true need of the people and God’s message to them. We need to serve people with the diakonia. We need to discover what the Spirit of God wants to say in each particular situation; this can never happen unless we learn the ministry of diakonia. Learning “diakonia” is based on “liturgia”. The angels are able to minister to the people this inspired ministry of “diakonia” because they have learned the ministry of “liturgia” to God. This ‘liturgia’ made the angels learn the absolute obedience to God and helped them understand His heart and mind. Therefore, they are able to reveal to people what is in God’s heart and mind and bring to them messages from God.

The early fathers of the Church resembled the angels in their ministry. When people come to them with a need, they served them in an inspired way and they never repeated the advice. Yet, when they entered their rooms to worship, they prayed the psalms with many prostrations every day. They had gigantic spirits.

Even nowadays, anyone who follows this spiritual rhythm enters into inexpressible depth in worship.

- ***Prostration helps in self-deliverance from bondages and from other lordships on one's life; it is an act of proclaiming the lordship of Jesus (since one would bow to another who is higher and lord over him). This brings to the surface any hidden evil lordship (Isaiah 26:13)***

The early fathers advised their disciples to prostrate while saying few words of prayer, especially when their disciples complained of certain sins or problems in their lives that they were unable to overcome. As a result of these prostrations and prayers, their disciples witnessed true deliverance from their problems.

More important, prostration was used as a means for breaking bondages of persistent sins caused by evil bonds. Though the early fathers had the spiritual authority and power to break the bonds with one word, they did not like to use this method; they used it only in special situations and they used it very carefully. This is because they had a conviction that breaking the evil bonds by the authority of the word can end the problem instantaneously; yet, the person would be subject to being attacked by stronger evil powers. Therefore, the most secure way for breaking the bondage and never letting it come back is that the person himself, as a redeemed believer, would break his own bondages. They called it 'self-deliverance'. They believed that the strongest means of breaking bondages is prostration.

In Isaiah 26:13, we read: 'O Lord our God, masters besides you have had domain over us; but by You only we make mention of Your Name'. This means that other lords or masters can dominate one's life; these are the evil spirits that can bind us. The word 'lord' refers to a god or high power who wants someone to prostrate and bow down before him. Therefore, when one prostrates before God, this means that he is proclaiming that God is the only Master and Lord over his life. This in turn means that any other lords or masters should depart.

By prostrating, one would be doing this proclamation in action. Repeating the prostration is a repetition of the proclamation that God is my Lord and hence any other lords have to leave because the Lordship of God is higher than any other authority.

When people, suffering from bondages from evil spirits, went to the spiritual fathers in the desert asking for help, they taught them self-deliverance through prostrating before God. After a little while, those people would come back testifying their release from the bondages.

This still happens up to the present day in the life of people who know this principle, accept it and follow it.

- ***Prostration is the means by which the body can share in worship (Romans 12:1). It also restores and corrects man's disintegration that has resulted from the fall.***

'Therefore I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship' (Romans 12:1).

Paul urges the believers in Rome to offer their bodies in worship. We tend to sit down in prayer and argue that we worship with our hearts; yet the bible tells us that together with the heart and mind, the body has to take part in worship. How can the body worship? It is through prostrating in an act of worship. When the body shares in worship, it is sanctified and its natural instincts are sanctified too.

The fruits of repetitive prostration are far beyond expectation. Because of the fall, the human elements of the person became disintegrated; the mind, soul and body became disconnected from each other. One of the manifestations of redemption in one's life is that all these elements become harmonious and connected –according to man's original creation. The early fathers focused on the inner life; hence, they were able to discern when the person is restored to this integration and harmony. This integration is important as it changes the person's life completely. The early fathers believed that there are many things that can aid in this integration, one of which is that one should let the body, the mind and the soul share in prayer and worship. The body can share in worship only in two ways: 'prostration' and 'fasting'. Therefore, they emphasized the importance to these two things.

- ***Prostration is a mystical partaking in the power of the death and the resurrection of Jesus (Romans 6:8). It is also an expression of love and gratitude (1 John 3:18) for Christ who saved us from sin and its dominion and from Satan and his authority.***

When one prostrates, he falls down to the ground and then rises up. In so doing, he proclaims that he is a sinner and his place is in the grave, yet he was lifted and raised up by Christ's resurrection. By prostrating, one is also asking for the power of Christ's resurrection to raise him. The early fathers maintain that this act opens the door in the spirit for receiving renewed power of resurrection.

Prostration is also an expression of love and gratitude to Christ for His salvation. The early fathers loved to express their gratitude to Christ not just in words but also in deed (1 John 3:18). So we prostrate to express our love and gratitude to Him for His salvation.