

SUNDAY THEOSIS #3-25

Praying the Psalms By Father Jack Custer

THE PSALMS OF VESPERS (Part 2)

PSALM 1 (Continued)

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundred-fold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10, 29-30 RSV).

This text helps us see what Psalm 1 really promises. The evidence of Scripture argues against expecting that righteousness will always lead to ease and prosperity here and now. Even if there was a period in which Israel expected such a material reward for serving God, the NT clarifies the matter in two ways. First, the righteousness we claim for ourselves does not earn us salvation. All the spiritual gifts God gives us are free, unmerited expressions of His love.

Obedient service to God is simply how human beings stay in relationship with Him and so share in the grace He gives us. Secondly, what God gives is Himself—a share in His life, participation in His love. "Prosperity" is one way to talk about this gift: the life of the righteous will finally prosper because it will be transformed into an eternal participation in God's life. The tree of life, rooted in God, watered by God, bearing fruit¹ by



¹ To understand the difference between fruits of God's righteousness and our own self-righteous works, we should begin with the teachings of Romans 7,4-5; Galatians 5,22; and John 15,1-16; these will guide us to a correct understanding of Jesus' parables: Matthew 3,8.10; 7,19-20; 13,1-26; 21,43.

God's power, is a better way to imagine how a right relationship with God gives meaning, purpose and prosperity to our lives.

We may also understand the prosperity of the righteous another way. The man who meditates on the Law of the Lord is seeking to know and to do God's will. If the righteous want what God wants, they will always be satisfied because, in the end, God's will for the good prevails. "All that he does prospers" because he only does what he knows God wants. We pray for the grace of actively agreeing and cooperating with God's will every time we say the Lord's Prayer.

Psalm 1 expresses confident faith that the final judgment will be a celebration of God's justice. In the newer books of the OT we find growing expectation of a final "day" when the Lord would intervene to judge all people. The clearest expression of hope for the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment is found in Daniel 12,1-3:

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (RSV)

Psalm 1 may also contain an expression of this doctrine. The Hebrew and Greek of v. 5 both literally say that the wicked will not arise (or stand) at the judgment. In the NT era, the Pharisees were already teaching that all human beings will rise bodily on the last day to be judged (Matthew 22,23; Acts 23,8). Christians likewise hold this belief.

The concluding verse expresses the happy ending for the righteous with an odd use of the verb "know." Perhaps we are meant to see a parallel: "the Lord knows the way of the just" because the just who spend their life meditating on Torah know the way of the Lord. Note too that the originally singular "just man" has now become a group of "the just." Because they all sought out the will of the Lord, the individual "ways" of each of the righteous have converged. In Hebrew, the verb "to know" can express recognition (the Lord approves the way of the just) but often it expresses a relationship. Psalm 1 may therefore reflect one of the ways Jesus describes Himself judging the dead: He will say to the wicked "I do not know you" (Matthew 25,12).

Psalm 112² resembles Psalm 1 especially in its beginning and in its conclusion. Psalm 112 (vv. 1-2) begins: "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in His commandments! His descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed." It goes on to promise prosperity (3) and concludes with a glimpse at the failure of the wicked: "The wicked man will see it and be angry, gnash his

² The first three verses of Psalm 112 are sung as the Second Antiphon for the Divine Liturgy on Christmas.



the psalms over the hours of the liturgical day. The cycle begins with the new liturgical week, Great Vespers on Saturday evening, where the first portion (kathisma) of the Psalter, Psalms 1-8 is prescribed to be read after the Litany of Peace. As the monastic custom spread to parish churches, the reading of these psalms was abbreviated by selecting verses from the kathisma and embellishing them with melody. Today, the common practice is to sing the first and last verses of Psalm 1, followed by the final verses of the next two psalms (2,11-12; 3,78). The first kathisma is also sung on feasts of the Lord, of the Mother of God and of the more prominent saints.³

Thus, at every festive Great Vespers, we celebrate first of all the human choice in favor of wisdom and obedience to God's will. This much, choosing and struggling to remain faithful to the choice, we must do for our-

teeth and fade away; the desire of the wicked man will be destroyed" (10).
Strictly speaking, it is only by coincidence that Psalm 1 has become such a prominent part of Byzantine liturgy. In monasteries, it is customary to read the entire Psalter on a weekly basis, dividing

3 The first Kathisma is sung at Vespers for all feasts of Polyeleos rank. For all these feasts, Psalms 135-136 (Polyeleos) are sung at Matins.



selves in response to God's gracious invitation. The happy conclusion of a righteous life—the blessing of salvation—is something God also gives graciously and not something we can earn or claim for ourselves as a reward for making the right choices.

At Great Vespers on Saturday evening, we may hear in "Arise O Lord, save me my God" (Psalm 3,7) the first foreshadowing of the Resurrection of Christ. At

feasts of the saints, particularly of the martyrs, we may recall how each of them 'served the Lord with fear' (Psalm 2,11) and the various trials out of which God saved them. They now share in Christ's Resurrection as we also hope to do. Psalm 1 continues to lay before us the most basic choice: life or death, blessing or curse. What has changed is that the promises of life and blessing are no longer merely written in the book of the Law for us to meditate upon them. Christ, "the Wisdom of God and the Power of God" has made them real in His own Incarnation and made them realizable for us in a way the Law could not. "He took away the curse, he gave the blessing, and by trampling death, he gave us everlasting life."⁴

For more educational information, visit:

Books: www.ecpubs.com
Media: www.olconference.com
StreamingVideo: www.oltv.tv

4 In Romans 10,4-13, St Paul identifies Jesus with everything Moses promises about the Law in Deuteronomy 30.