

PSALM 12

✠ This psalm is written in the form of a Lament.

✧ See the note about “lament” in the introduction to Psalm 3.

✠ This psalm is also identified as a “Royal Psalm”.

✧ See the note about “royal psalm” in the introduction to Psalm 2.

✠ This Psalm is read fully at Great Compline. It is used (verses 2, 4) as the Second Prokeimenon of the Wednesday Presanctified Liturgy in the First Week of Great Lent. It is used (verse 6) as the Prokeimenon in the Moleben of General Thanksgiving, and in the Moleben for the New Year.

✧ Father Patrick Reardon mentions that this psalm is read in both the East and in the West at Compline. This is so because we are about to sleep, and we ask the Lord that the sleep be not unto death. We praise the Lord and give thanks to Him for every good thing that we have been given during the day that is about to end. He further mentions that this psalm may be perceived from the perspective of Christ, on the eve of His Passion in the Garden of Gethsemane.

✠ *The Orthodox Study Bible* shows that this psalm teaches us in three ways how to attain to a greatly joyful heart in singing to the Lord. The first is by godly sorrow and repentance, lest the devil and sinful passions prevail over us. The second is by asking the Lord to enlighten the eyes of the heart, lest the sleep in death overtake us. The third is by hoping on the Lord’s mercy, lest we fall into hopelessness.

“Appeal to Christ, the True Light”

“Progress of a soul from desolation to exaltation”

“My heart rejoices in Thy salvation”

1 For the End. A psalm by David.

V 1 About the Inscription : in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, the Inscription is : “To the Choir-master. A psalm of David”.

✠ About “for the End” : see the note about “for the End” on Psalm 4:1.

[“Εως πότε, Κύριε Usque quo, Domine ?]

2 How long, O LORD, will You forget me, even to the end ?/ How long will You turn Your Face away from me ?

V 2 About this verse : Father P Reardon mentions that this particular verse may express the distress of all

humanity as the result of having been removed from Paradise.

✠ About “*How long*” : Saint John Chrysostom points out that this is the cry of one who has known Divine favour, and now laments the apparent absence. Yet, we are exhorted by him not to consider this as forgetting, but rather, abandonment. This sense of abandonment is to our advantage, however. We can perceive that we are abandoned as a result of our own inattention, indifference, and lack of focus on the Lord, hence His providential remedy of withdrawing until we are ready to pay closer attention. Saint John says that the opposites of indifference, heedlessness and sloth are the remedies of enthusiasm, eagerness, and zeal. Doing good works, being sober, and being watchful are also helpful. These remedies are provided by the Lord. We are taught by our falls (see Jeremiah 2:19). Our rebellion chastises us, and our vices convict us. Further, he says, the majority of persons cannot grasp the signs as they truly are, and they erroneously perceive that God’s remembering is revealed by their having material prosperity, and having all go well.

✧ Saint Augustine paraphrases the Prophet by asking the Lord how long He will keep him from spiritually understanding Christ, the Wisdom of God, and how long He would turn away His Face. However, Saint Augustine points out that the Lord neither turns His back, nor could He ever forget. Rather, the trouble is the impurity and clouded vision of our fallen human eyes which are not yet ready to see Him.

✧ Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) reminds us that God sends His Grace and withdraws it. In the beginning of our spiritual-mental struggle, the intervals between its withdrawal and its refreshing return are longer. However, with greater asceticism, they become shorter.

✧ We often ask “*how long*” about many things, but the Lord’s time is not ours, as is evident in the context of Psalm 89:4. In this psalm, “*how long*” is repeated several times for emphasis. It is important for us to develop trust in the Lord’s love, to wait for Him, and not to insist. “*How long*” also means “*until when*”, which is used as an alternative translation in this Psalter (see the note about “*until when*” on Psalm 6:4 ; see also Psalms 78:5 ; 88:47 ; 93:3).

✧ See verse 3 ; see the note about “*how long*” on Psalm 4:3.

✠ About “*Lord*” : see the note about “*Lord*” on Psalm 1:2.

✠ About “*will You forget me*” : Saint John Chrysostom presumes from the outset that we have already experienced the Lord’s love. In this context, from time to time, it seems to us as though God has forgotten us, or abandoned us. Saint John reminds us that the Lord allows us to sense this sometimes in order to sharpen our love for Him.

✧ Saint Athanasius advises us that although the plots of the enemies persist for a long time, we ought not to lose heart. The Lord does not forget us. Rather, we ought to call on Him by singing Psalm 12.

✧ Saint Hesychius of Jerusalem reminds us that even a temporary forgetfulness about us by God would be a very serious matter. It would mean our death, and the loss of the gift of immortality.

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew, citing Saint Maximus the Confessor, comments that even when our sadness takes the image of despair, we must not forget that God can give us a gift. He can descend to enlighten our minds through knowledge. He can enkindle in us virtue and lift us up to Him in the work of developing righteousness

✧ The saying rightly is : “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”. Anyone experiencing the

absence of a loved-one knows this. Nothing is more important to any one of us than the priority of love of the Lord. In this love is our very life. At the same time, we must always remember that the Lord is not actually forgetting us. Were He to forget us, we would cease to exist. He loves us to life.

✧ See the note about “*God has forgotten*” on Psalm 9:32.

✧ About “*turn Your Face away*” : Saint John Chrysostom reminds us that the Lord does turn away His Face when we are disobeying His commandments. This action reveals His care for us. Because of love, He turns away His Face in order that He might the more gently entice us.

✧ Saint Anthony the Great says that to say that God turns away from the sinful is like saying the sun turns away from the blind.

✧ See the note about “*turned His Face away*” on Psalm 9:32.

✧ About “*Face*” : see the note about “*Face*” on Psalm 4:7.

3 How long shall I lay up counsels in my soul,/ and pains in
my heart by day and by night ?/ How long shall my enemy be
exalted over me ?

V 3 About “*How long shall I lay up counsels*” : Saint Augustine comments that we generally feel the need to seek counsel only in negative circumstances. Therefore, this question is tantamount to asking how long will things be bad for me. He continues to reflect that unless we take counsel within ourselves with the intention of exercising godly mercy, the Lord does not lead us towards our goal, that is, to Christ, and thus we are not given face-to-face knowledge of God.

✧ About “*how long*” : see verse 2.

✧ About “*counsels*” : see the note about “*counsel*” on Psalm 1:1.

✧ About “*soul*” : see the note about “*soul*” on Psalm 3:3.

✧ About “*pains*” : see Psalms 30:11 ; 40:4 ; 93:19 ; 106:39 ; 114:3 ; 126:2.

✧ About “*heart*” : see verse 6 ; see the note about “*heart*” on Psalm 4:3.

✧ About “*by day and by night*” : see the note about “*by day and by night*” on Psalm 1:2.

✧ About “*how long shall my enemy ...*” : Saint Augustine suggests that the enemy could be either the devil, or the fallen flesh warring against us.

✧ Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea shows us that when we sin, we enable the Adversary to become domineering over us. Thus, we are pressed down by our sin : sin tramples and oppresses our spirit.

✧ See Judges 6:13.

✧ About “*enemy*” : see verse 5 ; see the note about “*enemies*” on Psalm 5:9.

✧ Father P Reardon reminds us that these words of exceeding sorrow prepare for the prayer of our

Saviour in Gethsemane, as reflected also in Hebrews 5:7. It was in this garden that the first blood of the Passion was shed. Our Saviour's sweat in intense prayer and agony was like drops of blood. We are reminded of the darkness of the night of the betrayal of Christ, and also of the night on which Jacob wrestled with the Lord (see 1 Moses 32:24-32 ; Matthew 26:37, 38 ; Mark 14:33, 34 ; Luke 22:44 ; John 13:30).

4 Look attentively ; hear me, O LORD my God./ Illumine my eyes,
so that I may never sleep unto death,

V 4 About "*look attentively*" : this is the given meaning of the Greek verb. A possible alternative could be "look upon". However, the verb is often translated as "look down upon" ; but this is misleading, and it could have the effect of seeming to limit God to a position of "up", rather than being omnipresent. The phrase "look down upon" could also erroneously suggest that the Lord looks with condemnation, with scorn, or with disdain, and should thus be avoided.

✧ See the note on Psalm 65:7 ; see also Psalms 24:16 ; 32:13 ; 39:5 ; 68:17 ; 73:20 ; 79:15 ; 83:10 ; 85:16 ; 118:6, 132.

✧ About "*God*" : see the note about "*God*" on Psalm 3:3.

✧ About "*illumine ... to death*" : Saint Gregory of Nazianzus exhorts us that, if we are spiritually blind and unenlightened, then we ought to allow our eyes to be enlightened by seeing light in God, so that we do not sleep in death. In God's light, we may see the three-fold and undivided Divine Light. [See Psalm 35:10].

✧ Saint Cyril of Alexandria cites 1 Corinthians 13:12 and Job 12:22 as he writes that "*we see in a mirror dimly*" and "*we know in part*" ; but He who "*uncovers deep things out of darkness and has brought into light the shadow of death*" sends the light of truth to those who desire to know Him. It is, therefore, necessary that we prostrate ourselves before the Lord and repeat : "*Illumine my eyes, so that I may never sleep unto death*" ; for to slip away from righteousness, from Orthodoxy, and from the truth of the divinely-inspired Scriptures is, in fact, to sleep in death.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus expresses that when he is feeling overwhelmed by difficulties, and when he is in the grip of discouragement, he can be in a sort of sleeping state. At such a time, if the light of the Lord's assistance shines upon him, it disperses the darkness of trouble, and it ends the slumber of discouragement. He adds prayerfully to the Lord that should the Lord delay the help, he fears that the sleep could be unto death as the distress becomes stronger than his resolve.

✧ Bishop Eusebius of Cæsarea reminds us that the energies emanating from the light-filled Face of God convey gifts to those who are willing to receive them. Such ones bask in these energies as though they were the rays of the sun. However, if one has turned away, then his spirit lives in the dark shadows. If one persists in sin, then the darkness increases, because this one has turned away from the Divine Light.

✧ About "*illumine my eyes*" : Saint Augustine mentions that we must understand that this means the eyes of our heart.

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) writes that when the inner eye is illuminated by God

But I have hoped on Your mercy ;/ my heart shall exult in Your salvation./ I shall sing to the LORD, my Benefactor,/ and I shall chant to the Name of the LORD Most High.

V 6 About this verse : Father P Reardon reminds us that this verse prepares for our Saviour's victory over the ancient enemy of race who has constantly resisted Him. Father Patrick also reminds us of the importance of recalling all this every night before we sleep.

✠ About "*hoped on Your mercy*" : Saint John Chrysostom draws our attention to the humility and sound attitude of King David in these words. He reminds us that the King-Prophet has innumerable virtues and gifts on his own account, but that he makes no mention of them at all in this verse. Saint John reminds us, however, of the protestations of King David's innocence as we see in Psalm 7:4-5 ; and he comments that the Prophet can only have spoken about such things in that psalm because of the intense pressure that he suffered at the time. Indeed, the Prophet here focusses his attention on God's mercy and compassion.

✧ Saint Augustine comments that when a righteous person has not been shaken, but rather has remained steadfast in the Lord, that person must never claim credit for this, because that would become an invitation to pride which is certain to shake the person who boasts of steadfastness.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus writes that it is obvious to us that King David wrote these words after his sin. We see here that he relies not on his own righteousness, but on the Lord's mercy. He trusts in this only.

✧ Cassiodorus, reflecting on mercy, which is an aspect of divine love, comments that the love of God is as it were a spring shower of virtues. Under this, a blessed longing germinates, and good works bear fruit. This love, as is outlined by the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 13, is always in balance and rises above every activity of darkness. All those in Heaven are afire with this love.

✠ About "*hope*" : see the note about "*hope*" on Psalm 4:6.

✠ About "*mercy*" : see the note about "*mercy*" on Psalm 5:8.

✠ About "*heart*" : see verse 3.

✠ About "*exult in Your salvation*" : Saint John Chrysostom reminds us that there are at least two sorts of exultation. He refers us to the ungodly sort that is mentioned in verse 5 of this psalm (exulting over someone's fall), and he contrasts it with the godly exultation of the godly King David. The former is from the devil ; the latter is from the Lord. The former we are to shun ; the latter we are to embrace. Saint John points out that the hope-filled soul of the Prophet is giving thanks, even before being aware that he has received what he has requested. He knows that the Lord will answer when a person is asking with fervour, heart-felt trust, confidence and understanding, because the heart is opened to be able to receive. Saint John emphasises that this gives joy to his soul, because the Lord is his salvation. By contrast, those who are slothful and negligent in their requests are often unable to appreciate the gift, because they may not even be able to notice that it has been given.

✧ See Psalm 9:15.

✠ About "*exult*" : see verse 5.

✠ About "*salvation*" : see the note about "*salvation*" on Psalm 3:9.

✠ About "*sing*" : see 2 Moses 15:1 (Matins Canticle 1) ; Psalms 20:14 ; 26:6 ; 32:3 ; 56:8 ; 58:17 ; 67:33 ; 88:2 ;

95:1, 2 ; 97:1 ; 100:1 ; 103:33 ; 107:2 ; 136:4 ; 137:5 ; 143:9 ; 149:1.

✠ About “*Benefactor*” : the Greek verb εὐεργετέω, *eyergeteō*, means “to work [the] good”. “*Benefactor*” (the one who does good) is an English translation of the Greek verbal adjective. It may also mean “to show kindness to”.

✧ “*Benefactor*” is used in this place as a sort of title for the Lord. See the notes on Psalm 17:2, 3.

✧ See Psalm 56:3.

✠ About “*chant ... High*” : Saint John Chrysostom shows us the meaning of the last part of this verse as he draws our attention to the fact that the deeply-grateful King David desires to make a permanent and enduring record of his thankfulness to the Lord for the multitude of ways in which he has been saved by Him. By keeping the mindfulness of the Lord’s kindness and salvation constantly in the heart, and by constantly singing to Him in gratitude, a person can easily escape evil attacks and avoid falling into any traps. Ever since the composition of this psalm, this example of gratitude has served as a formative example for pre-Christian Jewish worship and the worship of the Orthodox Church from the beginning. Saint John exhorts us all to imitate the Prophet and always to be grateful ourselves and hope on the Lord’s mercy.

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) draws our attention to the intimate relationship between God and His Name.

✠ About “*I shall chant ... High*” : see the notes about words in this similar phrase on Psalm 7:18.

O Omnipotent God, do not turn away Your Face from us,
and let not our enemies be exalted against us ;
but just as You flood our heart with the joy of Your salvation,
so cause us to escape the sleep of the second death. — Roman
