

PSALM 22

- ✠ This psalm is written in the form of a Royal Psalm. It is a song of trust.
 - ✧ About “royal psalm” : see the note about “royal psalm” in the introduction to Psalm 2.
 - ✧ About “song of trust” : see the note about “psalm of trust” in the introduction to Psalm 10.
- ✠ Saint Ambrose of Milan strongly reminds us that this whole psalm has sacramental allusions (which can be discerned from a Christian perspective).
- ✠ Arnobius the Younger points out that the previous psalm, Psalm 21, addresses the tribulation of the Passion of Christ, whereas in this psalm, the words refer to the joy of the Resurrection.
- ✠ Cassiodorus explains that the Christian, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, and in the context of the Ten Commandments, here gives thanks for the Ten Kindnesses which are referred to in phrases of this psalm.
- ✠ Because of its sacramental allusion, this is one of the Psalms of Preparation for Communion. It is used (verses 1, 2, 6) as the Prokeimenon of Tuesday Vespers. It is used (verses 4, 6) as the Prokeimenon in the Moleben for “Those about to travel by water”. It is read during the dressing of the body of a deceased person. It is read during the funeral of a presbyter or bishop, with the refrain “Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia.” interpolated between the verses.

“Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist”

“God the Good Shepherd-King guides and keeps His sheep”

“Love follows the followers of Love”

1 A psalm by David.

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

- ✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) gives an alternative inscription : “The psalm of the Good Shepherd”.

[Κύριος ποιμαίνει με Dominus regit me]

The LORD shepherds me,/ and nothing shall be lacking to me.

- ✠ Saint Athanasius exhorts us that, when we perceive that we are shepherded, safely guided, and guarded by the Lord, we ought to sing Psalm 22.
- ✠ It can be useful to relate the eucharistic connexion of this psalm with the very important principle of

hospitality in general. One might remember the Hospitality of Abraham (1 Moses 18, 1-8), especially because of the continuity of this with the Covenant, and with what this encounter precedes : the rescue of Lot's family from destruction. Saint John Chrysostom asks us to remember the words of the Gospel, and of the Apostle Paul in this regard (Matthew 18:5 ; Hebrews 13:2).

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

✠ About "*shepherds*" : Saint Augustine teaches us that when we say "*the Lord shepherds me*", we leave no basis upon which to trust in ourselves.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus points out that the provider of food is called "*shepherd*". This is the title that Jesus Christ used for Himself in John 10:14. He did so also through the Prophet Ezekiel 34:23.

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) comments that this verse refers to the one shepherd (in whom is prefigured the Lord Jesus. He always remains faithful to Himself, and thus to His flock. See John 10:11-16 ; Hebrews 13:20 ; 1 Peter 2:25.

✧ *The Orthodox Study Bible* indicates that in this psalm the Church recognises that Jesus the Christ is the Good Shepherd, as noted by Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus, Saint Ambrose, and Saint Augustine.

✧ See the note about "*shepherd*" on Psalm 2:9.

✠ About "*nothing shall be lacking to me*" : see 5 Moses 2:7 ; 8:4 ; 29:4-5 ; 32:10 (Matins Canticle 2) ; Philippians 4:19.

2 In a place of green pasture, there He has pitched my tent./ By restful water He brought me up from childhood.

V 2 About "*pasture*" : Saint Augustine tells us that this pasture, in which we are to be satisfied, is not one in which there is a variety of grasses. Rather, the grasses are all the sweet grasses of the words of God and His commandments which have been there sown. This pasture has been tasted by the Prophet, who said : "*How sweet to my throat are Your teachings, more than honey to my mouth*" (Psalm 118:103 ; see also Psalm 18:11).

✧ See Ezekiel 34:14 ; John 10:9 ; 21:15-17.

✠ About "*water*" : Saint Augustine makes this paraphrase : "He nurtured me beside the water of baptism, where those who have lost their soundness and strength are made new". Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus and Cassiodorus comment in a similar manner.

✧ See John 7:37-39 ; Apocalypse 7:17.

3 He turned my soul about ;/ He led me on the way on the paths of righteousness,/ for the sake of His Name.

V 3 About “*turned my soul about*” : Saint Augustine comments that we may make such a confession only when we can admit that it could not happen because of any worthiness or ability on our part, but rather because we have called to Him ; and He, Himself, has done this. Every good is accomplished in Him, through Him, and for His sake (see Romans 11:36).

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) writes that King David thus expresses the idea that he has been restored and returned to what he was, and regained the right path. The verb ἐπιστρέφω, “*epistrephō*” means, amongst other things, to come back from somewhere, to find the road that was lost. Sometimes, the soul can alienate herself from her own authenticity. The return itself is made by God.

✧ Since to turn about implies such a complete change, it may be understood to have a spiritual implication similar to the word for repentance, μετάνοια, *metanoia*.

✧ About “*turn about*” : see the note on Psalm 7:13.

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

✧ About “*led me on the way*” : see the note on Psalm 5:9.

✧ About “*paths of righteousness*” : Saint Augustine elaborates, and says that the Lord guides us on His narrow, righteous paths, where few walk. He does this not because of any supposed merit on our part, but only for the sake of His own Name. See Matthew 7:14.

✧ See the note on Psalm 24:4 ; see also Proverbs 2:13, 20 ; 4:10.

✧ About “*paths*” : see the note about “*paths*” on Psalm 8:9.

✧ About “*sake of ... Name*” : see Psalms 24:11 ; 30:4 ; 43:27 ; 78:9 ; 105:8 ; 108:21 ; 129:5 ; 142:11 ; Daniel 3:34 (Matins Canticle 7) ; 1 John 2:12.

4 Even if I were to walk in the midst of the shadow of death,/ I shall not
fear bad things,/ for it is You that are with me :/ Your rod, and Your staff
– it is they that have consoled me.

V 4 About “*walk in the midst of the shadow of death*” : Origen reminds us that walking in this shadow is certainly not the same as sitting in it. Sitting means that one has become attached and rooted there, and the infection of evil sets in deeply. He becomes unable to see any light. One who walks, however, moves ahead in hope.

✧ About “*shadow of death*” : Saint Augustine explains that as long as we live and walk in the midst of a multitude of vices and worldly pressures, we walk “*in the midst of the shadow of death*”. He exhorts us to allow the light of Christ to shine in our hearts with the love of God and neighbour, so that we will have no fear of anyone or anything, since He is with us.

✧ Cassiodorus tells us that the “*shadow of death*” is the devil, who sets snares for us in the darkness and fog which are designed to help us lose our way and to fall into eternal death. If we are faithful and if we rely on the Divine Mercy, we need have no fear whatever of such illusory traps.

✧ An alternate reading can be “*valley of deep darkness*,” but “*shadow of death*” is the traditional

reading of the scribes.

✧ See Psalms 43:20 ; 87:7 ; 106:10, 14 ; Job 3:5 ; Isaiah 9:1 ; Matthew 4:16 ; Luke 1:79 (Matins Canticle 9, Part 2).

✧ About “*death*” : see the note about “*death*” on Psalm 6:6.

✧ About “*I shall not fear*” : see the note about “*I shall not fear*” on Psalm 3:7.

✧ Evagrius of Pontus reminds us that when we live in pure prayer, we may hear noises, or even screams from the demons ; but we will not collapse because in the Lord, we have no fear of evil.

✧ Saint Augustine assures us that it is the Lord within us who overcomes all fear and darkness.

✧ About “*for it is You that are with me*” : see Isaiah 8:8-9 ; Matthew 28:20 (see the Kontak of Ascension).

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew, following Saint Maximus the Confessor, mentions that “*rod*” is the judgement of God, and the “*staff*” is Providence, that is, His care for Man.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus explains that with the “*staff*” the Lord supports us in our weakness, and with the “*rod*”, He guides us on the right way. He also suggests that we regard the Holy Cross itself as a combination of the two, since it is constructed of essentially two pieces.

✧ Cassiodorus similarly reminds us that the “*staff*” aids us by supporting us in our weakness. It consoles us. The “*rod*” also consoles us, but it does so through correcting us in sometimes necessarily painful ways. This is supported by the commentary of Origen.

✧ Saint Jerome confirms all the previous interpretations. He recalls for us Hebrews 12:6 (see Proverbs 3:12) : “*Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives*”. Proverbs uses the word “*instruct*” to describe this correcting and guiding activity of the Lord. See the note about “*be instructed*” on Psalm 2:10.

5 You prepared a table before my face,/ opposite those afflicting me./ You dressed my head with oil,/ and Your cup which inebriates me, how greatly excellent it is.

V 5 About “*prepared a table*” : Saint Ambrose of Milan tells us plainly that the prepared table consists of the “*Living Bread which came down from Heaven*” (John 6:51), the Word of God.

✧ Saint Augustine interprets that the Lord has prepared a table in our sight, so that we should no more be fed with milk as a baby (see 1 Corinthians 3:2) ; but rather, being now more mature, we should take meat, and be strengthened against those who trouble us.

✧ It is the Lord who has prepared this table, which may be a metaphorical table. Further, the table described in this psalm may be seen as a preparation for the Eucharistic Table. See Psalm 77:19.

✧ Origen consoles us by reminding us that as many times as we may suffer tribulation and affliction, so many times will a spiritual table be placed before us. He exhorts us to keep focussed on the spiritual table, upon the Lord, and to give thanks continually. He further emphasises that the nourishment upon the table is the True Food, the Eucharistic Food.

✠ About “*before my face*” : This word in Greek is also sometimes translated as “before me”, “in the presence of”, “in the face of”. “Face-to-face” conveys Homer’s use of its root meaning, “look in the face”, which stresses the importance of the sense of sight in this encounter. There can be no implication of hostility on our part.

✧ See the note about “*before Your Face*” on Psalm 5:9.

✠ About “*opposite those afflicting me*” : the importance of this phrase, and particularly the preposition “*opposite*”, may be found in understanding that the Lord prepares a table in such a way that the afflicters are “*opposite*” me, across the table. Some translators use “*before my face*”. However, it may also mean “before”, “in the presence of”, depending on the grammar. The Greek word in this context does convey “*opposite*”. I eat together with those who afflict me. The table and I are before their face. The usage could be understood both positively or negatively. The situation of the bountiful table placed between the king and the afflicters suggests to some that the prepared table serves as a taunt to make the afflicters envious. However, this arrangement necessarily means that I am living in a state of forgiveness with those who are afflicting me. Orthodox Christians might well treat the table as a table of opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. I sit across the table from those who afflict me. I forgive them. Because I eat with them, I am in harmony with them. It is a long-standing custom that people invite to dinner only those with whom they are in harmony.

✠ About “*oil*” : Saint Ambrose of Milan explains that at the prepared table, the “*oil*” of sanctification is richly poured out on the heads of the righteous. This oil strengthens us inwardly, and it both protects us from and sends away the “*oil of a sinner*” (Psalm 140:5).

✧ This word may also be translated “*ointment*”, according to Syriac texts. Such aromatic ointments were placed on the heads of persons on important feast-days (sometimes shaped as cones), and the aromatic ointment would slowly melt on the head, and spread the aroma.

✧ See Psalms 91:11 ; 103:15 ; 132:2 ; Isaiah 25:6 ; Ecclesiastes 9:8 ; Matthew 6:17 ; Luke 7:37-38, 46 ; John 12:3.

✠ Saint Cyprian of Carthage explains that the “*cup*” is a metaphor of the Holy Eucharist. He says that the inebriation of the cup and of the Blood of the Lord are unlike what comes from worldly wine. Rather, this cup’s inebriation brings us to sobriety. It brings the minds of the faithful ones to true knowledge of God and to true wisdom. From the Eucharistic Cup comes the joy of Divine Mercy which salves the pain in our hearts.

✧ Saint Ambrose of Milan comments that ποτήριον, *potērion*, means “*cup*”. [The implication is that it is full of wine. It is also used as a metaphor for the Eucharistic Cup.] The word κράτιστον, *kratiston*, means “*excellent*”. It may also mean “*powerful*”, because the root of the word κράτιστον, in fact, means “*strength*” or “*power*”. He says that this powerful cup washes away every stain of sin.

✧ Cassiodorus adds to these interpretations by showing us that the cup refers to the Eucharistic Blood of the Lord. The inebriation which comes from this cup cleanses our minds, purges us from evil, and protects us from doing wrong. Whoever is not filled from this cup lingers in perpetual hunger and need.

✧ See Psalms 15:5 ; 115:4 ; Proverbs 9:2 ; Ecclesiastes 9:7 ; Isaiah 25:6 ; 1 Corinthians 10:16.

✠ About “*inebriates me*” : Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) considers that a good, poetic meaning of the

phrase could be : I am drunk with the scent of blooming orchards. The Bible translators Serban and Nikita Stethatos interpret that for those who improve spiritually, reading the Scripture is for them a divine cup of wine that cheers their hearts and takes them out of themselves (they get drunk) by the power and depth of the meaning (a kind of ecstasy in a spiritually advanced reader). The Masoretic text is simply, “my cup is plenteous drink”.

6 Your mercy shall closely pursue me all the days of my life,/ and my dwelling shall be in the house of the LORD for length of days.

V 6 About “*mercy*” : Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus identifies “*mercy*” with the Lord’s loving-kindness. Through this, the Lord does not wait for us to ask. Since the Lord knows all our needs, He does not wait for us to ask, but He provides for us in anticipation. He provides salvation, and a residence in the Divine Mansion for us, both in this world and in the Kingdom to come.

✧ Cassiodorus explains that the Lord’s “*mercy*” is always with us. It goes before us and bestows Grace, and it follows us in order to protect us and what has been given to us. This Grace and mercy protect us from the frequent demonic ambushes.

✧ The mercy of God is closely identified with the love of God. His mercy pursues not in the manner of chasing or hunting. Rather, His love and mercy are always present with us, and they are with us at all times and in all places (whether or not we acknowledge this or accept this).

✧ See the notes on Psalms 5:8.

✧ About “*my dwelling ... days*” : Cassiodorus explains that the “*house of the Lord*” in this phrase refers to the Jerusalem to come, the perfection of all blessings. It is lasting blessedness, unending joy, unto the ages of ages.

✧ See Psalm 26:4.

✧ About “*house of the Lord*” : see Psalms 26:4 ; 91:14 ; 115:10 ; 117:26 ; 121:1, 9 ; 133:1 ; 134:2.

O Lord, guide us by the pleasant reins of Your precepts ;
that, being granted the habitation of the eternal tabernacle,
we may be filled with the fulness of the eternal cup. — Roman
