

PSALM 23

✠ This psalm is written in the form of a Royal Psalm (from a liturgical act upon entering the sanctuary, probably used in connexion with a procession of the ark). This means that this psalm was likely used in a procession to the Holy Place, the Temple, on an occasion regarding the Ark of the Covenant which resided in the Holy of Holies of the Temple.

✧ About “royal psalm” : see the note about “royal psalm” in the introduction to Psalm 2.

✠ This psalm (verses 7-10 is used (in the Greco-Balkan custom) on the Feast of Pascha, after the procession, at the opening of the doors, before the beginning of Paschal Matins. This psalm (verses 7-10) is similarly used at the time of the sanctification of the Temple itself, again at the main doors. This psalm is used (verses 7, 9) in Canon 1 (Odes 4, 9) and Canon 2 (Odes 1, 3) and the Hymn of Light of Matins on the Feast of the Ascension of Christ. This psalm is read fully during the funeral of a presbyter or bishop, with the refrain “Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia” interpolated between the verses. It is used (verse 1) at the interment after every funeral, at the time of the filling of the grave. Historically, the whole psalm may have been read while the grave was filled. Nowadays, this one verse accompanies the symbolic spreading of earth on the coffin.

✠ Saint Athanasius recommends that we sing Psalm 23 when we wish to give thanks to God on the Lord’s Day. He also recommends its use at such times when we are particularly in awe of the order of creation (with reference to 1 Moses), of the Lord’s providence within that creation, and of the holy regulation of the Law. This singing will give voice to our prayer. He also suggests that we sing Psalm 18 at such times. He further explains to us that in Psalm 23 and in Psalm 47, we are able to see the Ascension of Christ.

“Descent to Hadēs, and Ascension of Christ”

“The King of Glory enters His sanctuary”

“Who can enter the holy mountain Temple ?”

1 A psalm by David. For the first day of the week.

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

✠ *The Orthodox Study Bible*, following Saint Augustine and Cassiodorus, indicates that this psalm prepares for the Resurrection of Christ, as is evidenced by the inscription that it is for the first day of the week (Sunday), the Lord’s Day, the day of Resurrection. See Matthew 28:1 ; Mark 16:2 ; Luke 24:1 ; John 20:1.

✠ Pseudo-Athanasius indicates that this psalm also addresses the Ascension of Christ.

[Τοῦ Κυρίου ἡ γῆ Domini est terra]

The earth belongs to the LORD, and its fulness :/ the world, and all those

dwelling in it.

✠ About this verse : Saint Athanasius calls our attention to the fact that these words refer to the Creation as reported in 1 Moses1.

✠ Saint Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that those who are foolish, forgetting that “*the earth belongs to the Lord...*”, deceive themselves that the earth and all that is could belong to them instead. Through such greed, the passion of having, they give themselves a false lordship over what they can never have. They conveniently forget that “*God is King of all the earth*” (Psalm 46:8).

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrillus adds that God is the Lord of all not because He took it from someone, but rather because He brought all that has being everywhere from non-being into being in the first place.

✧ Saint Augustine adds that the Gospel is preached to the whole earth ; and as they come to the Faith, the whole earth becomes His Church.

✧ Pseudo-Athanasius makes the extension to the ultimate rule of the Lord over all at the Second Coming.

✧ See 2 Moses 9:29 ; 19:5 ; 5 Moses 10:14 ; Psalms 49:12 ; 88:12 ; 94:4-5 ; Job 41:3 ; 1 Corinthians 10:26, 28 ; Apocalypse 4:11.

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

✠ About “*earth*” and “*world*” : see the note on Psalm 9:9.

2 He laid its foundations upon the seas,/ and upon the rivers He prepared it.

V 2

✠ About “*foundations*” : see the note about “*foundations*”

See Psalms 103:5 ; 135:6 ; Job 38:6 ; 2 Peter 3:5.

3 Who shall go up to the mountain of the LORD,/ and who shall stand in His holy place ?

V 3 About this verse : Cassiodorus points out that after demonstrating the complete authority of the Lord over creation, there follows an explanation of the character of those who would say that they belong to Him.

✠ About “*the mountain of the LORD*” : see the note about “*holy mountain*” on Psalm 2:6 ; see also Isaiah 2:2-3.

✠ Here, “*holy place*” is explicitly stated in the Greek, with two words.

✠ About “*who shall stand...*” : Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) points out that this question is effectively the same as the first (“*who shall go up...*”). It is a poetic Hebrew parallelism which indicates that the holy mountain means the same thing as holiness of the Tent of Meeting (“*holy place*”) [see Psalm 14:1].

✧ About the holiness of Mount Sinai, see 2 Moses 19:11-13.

✧ The identification of the holiness of Mount Sinai and the holiness of the Tent of Meeting may be extended also to its successor, the Jerusalem Temple.

✧ Origen makes the clarification, with reference to Psalm 39:3, “He set my feet upon a rock”, that this Rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).

4 The one who is innocent in hands and pure in heart ;/ who did not receive his soul for futility,/ who did not swear deceitfully to his neighbour :

V 4 About this verse, see Psalm 14:2-5 ; Isaiah 33:15.

✧ Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus explains that “hands” refer to pursuits ; “heart” refers to desires. He adds that with the heart, we form our intentions, and with the hands we put them into action.

✠ About “*innocent in hands*” : see the note on Psalm 9:29.

✠ About “*pure in heart*” : see Matthew 5:8.

✠ About “*pure*” : see the note about “*pure*” on Psalm 11:7.

✠ About “*heart*” : see the note about “*heart*” on Psalm 4:3.

✠ About “*not receive his soul for futility*” : Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) points out that this means the one who has not abused his soul that he nurtured seriously, and who has not exhausted his soul for nothing.

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

✠ About “*futility*” : see the note on Psalm 4:3.

✠ About “*swear*” : see 5 Moses 32:40 (Matins Canticle 2) ; Psalms 62:12 ; 88:36, 50 ; 94:11 ; 101:9 ; 131:11 ; Luke 1:73 (Matins Canticle 9, Part 2).

✠ About “*deceitfully*” : see the note about “*deceitful*” on Psalm 5:7. In the Greek, this is a prepositional phrase which cannot be translated as such and be understood.

✠ About “*neighbour*” : see the note about “*neighbour*” on Psalm 11:3.

5 this one shall receive blessing from the LORD,/ and mercy from God,
his Saviour.

V 5 About this verse : Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus draws our attention to the association of mercy with

blessing. He reminds us that both come only from the loving-kindness of the Lord. We need His mercy because we are so damaged, and we can in no way ever earn His blessing. He pours out His love on us freely and all-knowingly.

✧ Cassiodorus supports this perception. He emphasises that we cannot deserve blessings, but the Lord gives them freely from His loving-kindness. He notes that blessing comes first here because of the poetic device “*anastrophē*” (from the Greek word ἀναστροφή, meaning a turning-back or a turning-about). Thus, the order is reversed. Normally and logically, mercy would come first with forgiveness of sins, and blessing would come afterwards. However, in this case, the immensity of God’s compassionate mercy is emphasised by this order.

✧ About “*blessing*” : see the note about “*blessing*” on Psalm 3:9 ; see 1 Moses 32:26, 29 ; 35:9 ; Isaiah 51:2.

✧ About “*mercy*” : see the notes on Psalms 5:8.

✧ About “*God, his Saviour*” (and variants) : see 5 Moses 32:5 (Matins Canticle 2) ; Psalms 24:5 ; 26:1, 9 ; 61:3, 7 ; 64:6 ; 78:9 ; 94:1 ; Micah 7:7 ; Habakkuk 3:18 ; Isaiah 12:2 ; Luke 1:47 (Matins Canticle 9, Part 1).

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

6 This is the generation of those seeking the LORD,/ of those seeking the Face of the God of Jacob.

Pause

V 6 About this verse : Origen reminds us that only those who have been changed may see the Face of God and live. This change is that of those reborn in repentance and baptism.

✧ About “*generation*” : see the note about “*generation*” on Psalm 9:27.

✧ About “*seeking ... the Face*” : this repetition is a poetic intensification.

✧ About “*seeking the Lord*” : see Psalm 104:4.

✧ About “*seeking*” : see the note about “*seek*” on Psalm 4:3.

✧ About “*seeking the Face*” : see Psalms 26:8 ; 104:4 ; Hosea 5:15.

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

✧ About “*God of Jacob*” : see the note about “*God of Jacob*” on Psalm 19:2.

✧ About “*God*” : see verse 5.

7 Raise your gates, O you princes,/ and be lifted up, you eternal gates,/ and the King of Glory will come in.

V 7 About this verse : Saint Gregory the Theologian explains to us that this verse can refer to the Ascension of Christ. He encourages us that we ascend along with Him, and also be amongst those angels who receive

Him. He urges us to ask that the gates be made yet higher and lifted up so as to receive Him, who now returns after His Passion. In response to those who are perplexed by His return with His Body marked with the Passion, we should answer that this is indeed, *“The LORD, strong and powerful, the LORD, powerful in war ... the LORD of Powers : He is the King of Glory”*. He further comments that in the bodily Ascension, as Christ approached the Kingdom, the marvelling angels asked the questions posed in Isaiah 63:1-2: *“Who is this who comes from Edom, with red garments from Bozrah, so beautiful in His apparel, with force of strength ? ... Why are Your garments red and Your apparel as one who treads in a winepress ?”* The response he gives to the angels is that it is Christ Himself approaching. He now bears the beauty of His Body which suffered, which is adorned by the marks of His Passion. This Body is made incomparably beautiful by His divinity.

✧ About *“raise your gates”* : Saint Athanasius explains that in these words, the Psalter through the Prophet David prepares in advance for our Saviour’s bodily Ascension into Heaven (see Psalm 46:6). He further explains that it was not the Word Himself who needed the gates to be opened. He is Lord of all. He did not need to be exalted, since as God He is exalted. Rather, it is we who needed all this, we whom He uplifted in His own Body. This is that very Body which Christ first offered to death on behalf of all, and then through it made a path to Heaven. The gates (of Paradise) were closed not to Him, but rather to us because of our rebellion, and it is we who caused the closing of the gates (see Psalm 117:19-20). In His Death, Resurrection and Ascension, our Saviour heals this. His exaltation was, then, on our behalf (see Philippians 2:9). He became for us Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption (see 1 Corinthians 1:30) so that we might be exalted in His Righteousness (see Psalm 88:17). It is, then, the God-Man who enters the gates. Saint Hippolytus of Rome writes similarly.

✧ Saint Jerome comments with reference to Psalm 117:19 that in His Ascension, the Lord approached the gates with the command that they be raised. He was approaching them in great might and glory after the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection. With reference to Psalm 117:20, he adds that through these gates which the Lord entered together with the Wise Thief, the apostles, the martyrs and the faithful people have continuously entered.

✧ Metropolitan Bartholomew (Anania) writes that by *“raise”*, it is literally meant *“lift”*. Ancient city gates, such as those of the temple of Jerusalem, had no side opening, but they were lifted up by means of pulleys. He points out that in the Septuagint, the summons is twofold : to the *“boyars”* (princes, rulers, rulers), and to the gates themselves. However, in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, the summons is addressed only to the gates, not to the princes. The metropolitan further comments that the image is that of a conquering king who, having arrived at the gates, summons the rulers (literally : the principal leaders) to hand the city over to him. *“Eternal gates”* is a hyperbole for gates that stayed too long closed. The prophetic dimension, *“King of Glory”* is Jesus Christ Himself risen triumphant over death, who summons the *“gatekeepers of Hadēs”* to open to him, so that He may free those forever bound within (see 1 Peter 3:19). Saint Athanasius the Great comments on the 6th Ode of the Paschal Canon, and its eschatological perspective. He says that because of our sin, the gates of Heaven were closed. However, Jesus Christ, in His human flesh, will open it for us in His divine relationship as *“King of Glory”*.

✧ Archimandrite Lazarus (Moore) writes : *“The angels in attendance at the Lord’s ascension call to the angelic rulers or princes in charge of the gatekeepers to open the heavenly gates so that the King of Glory may enter, and they also address the actual doors that open into eternity”* (see Apocalypse 3:20).

✧ Christ Ascended is shining with lightning-brilliance, in ineffable light and splendour, because He is God.

✧ According to the RSV, “‘The *King of Glory*’ [vv. 7-10] means the God of Israel, whose presence is associated with the Ark (see 4 Moses 10:34-36)”.

✧ See 1 Corinthians 2:8.

✧ See verse 9.

8 Who is this King of Glory ?/ The LORD, strong and powerful,/ the LORD,
powerful in war.

V 8 About this verse : Saint Augustine comments (with a different emphasis from other commentators) that the answer to the question here asked by mortal nature is that it is, in fact, the Lord Himself. He who appeared to be a weak and vanquished Man was, in fact, also God. Thus, He is strong and powerful because He did battle with and conquered death. He invites mortal nature to touch the healed wounds and to behold His human weakness restored to immortal strength. See also his comment in verse 10.

✧ About “*Who is this King of Glory ?*” : Bishop Theodoret of Cyrrhus informs us that at the Ascension of Christ, this question was asked amongst the Bodiless Powers of Heaven. He then reminds us that these Bodiless Powers do not have advance or complete knowledge. They know what they are taught (see Ephesians 3:10). They did not yet know that within this Human Body was the Lord. After entering, He took His place at the right-hand of the Majesty on High [see Hebrews 1:3 ; see also Philippians 2:9].

✧ About “*strong*” : see the note about “*strong*” on Psalm 7:12.

✧ About “*powerful*” : see Psalm 44:4.

✧ See verse 10.

9 Raise your gates, O you princes,/ and be lifted up, you eternal gates,/ and
the King of Glory will come in.

V 9 See verse 7.

✧ About this verse : Origen adds to the previous this reference to the Prophecy of Isaiah 63:1, “Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious in His apparel, travelling in the greatness of His strength ?” He makes the link between this and the entrance of the Ascended Christ into Heaven.

10 Who is this King of Glory ?/ The LORD of Powers :/ He is the King of Glory.

V 10 About this verse, and the two preceding verses : Saint Augustine explains that in the Ascension of Christ, there is a double opening of gates. First, the gates of Hadēs are opened at the time of the Resurrection of

Christ. [See the destruction of these gates in the Icon of the Descent into Hadēs. Their destruction was permanent. See also the Orthodox Tropar of Pascha, and the other hymnography of Paschal Matins.] At the first opening, the angels ask who this is, since it was a new thing that God could be in Hadēs. The answer at that time was that He is the Mighty Lord who “trampled death by death”. The second opening of the gates took place at the time of the Ascension of Christ, and it was accompanied again by questions. The amazed angels now ask who this is, since it is the God-Man who approaches. This time, the answer is that this is the Lord Sabaoth, the Lord of Powers, the King of Glory who approaches in victorious triumph.

✠ About “*Lord of Powers*” : the term “*Lord of Powers*”, or “*Lord Sabaoth*”, is used as a substitute for the Divine Name. In Greek, the word δυνάμεων, *dynameōn*, “*of powers*” in this context refers to “an army, or armies, ready for war”. This Greek word translates the Hebrew “*sabaoth*”, which means “of powers”. In this psalm, the armies are considered to be the angelic forces (see Psalms 102:21 ; 148:2 with regard to these powers, i.e. angels). Related terms or titles include “*God of Powers*” and “*Lord God of Powers*”. All these are, as it were, names for God.

✧ See Psalms 58:6 ; 68:7 ; 79:5, 8, 15, 20 ; 83:2, 4, 9, 13 ; 88:9. See also the note on Psalm 7:18.

✠ About “*King of Glory*” : Eusebius, referring to Isaiah 6:3, brings our attention to the fact that both in the psalm and in the prophecy, this phrase is in the present tense. Since He is the King of Glory, the whole earth is filled with His glory [whether or not we are willing to perceive it].

✧ Saint Bede of Jarrow explains that the King of Glory appeared, “and made clear with what great might He had over come the death that He had temporarily tasted.

✧ Cassiodorus shows us that the King of Glory is He who said, “Those who glorify Me, I will glorify”, and that He “assigns power and strength and the other gifts to each one as He will”.

✠ See verse 8.

O God, You make firm the earth. All the world in its fulness serves You.

Restore us to innocence of life ; that we may, with Your leading,
ascend the mountain of sanctification. — Roman
