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Bible Study

STEP ONE

Let me start with a remark from an orthodox point of view. As you may know, in the Orthodox Church there is no difference between the prayer rule of the monastery and that of the parish or even of the particular prayer of an ordinary member of the church. That means: There are not different types of services, but of course there are different timetables and different possibilities in the monastery and in the world.

The biblical text I want to reflect on with you, belongs to the daily reading of the Orthodox Church, but is part of one of the somewhat exotic prayertimes of the Church, the so-called MESONYKTIKON which means „THE MIDNIGHT PRAYER“

The reason why we read this psalm at this very moment is described in v. 62:

*„At midnight I arose to give thanks to You
Because of the judgments of Your righteousness“*

First, we are informed here that midnight is for the author of this text the time to get up, for myself I must confess, it is rather the time to go to sleep. But it doesn't matter if this psalm is read at the end of the day or at the beginning, the theme is clearly defined:

„to give thanks to God because of the judgments of His righteousness“.

STEP TWO

We are speaking about psalm 119 according to the Hebrew Bible and 118 according to the counting of the Septuagint. (The Orthodox Church uses in its worship the Greek text of the Old Testament.) This psalm with its 176 verses is the longest of all psalms and at the same time the longest chapter of the entire Holy Scripture. This length made it difficult for some authors to write a review on it. E.g. St. Augustine writes in his commentary to the psalms:

„I have expounded all the rest of the Psalms, which we know the Book of the Psalms containeth, which by the custom of the Church is styled the Psalter, partly by preaching among the people, partly by dictations, as

well as I, by the Lord's help, was able; but the CXIXth Psalm, as well on account of its well-known length, as on account of its depth being fathomable by few."

And it is not only the length but also the composition of this psalm that is different from other psalms.

There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is a tightly constructed acrostich poem, wherein the first 8 phrases all start with Aleph, the first letter of the alphabet. The next 8 all begin with Beth, then 8 with Gimel, Daleth, and so on, all the way to Taw. That is why we have 176 verses, that means 8 verses for each of the 22 letters.

The same St. Augustine comments this special structure of the Hebrew psalms in the following way:

„That I have said nothing of the Hebrew alphabet, in which every eight verses are ranged under a particular letter, and the whole Psalm arranged in this manner, let no one wonder, since I found nothing that related especially to the Psalm: for it is not the only one which hath these letters. Let those who cannot find it in the Latin and Greek versions, since it is not adopted there, know that every set of eight verses in the Hebrew copies beginneth with that letter which is prefixed to them; as is indicated to us by those who are acquainted with Hebrew tongue. This is done with much more care than our writers have shown in their Latin or Punic compositions of Psalms which they style *abecedarii*. For they do not begin all the verses down to the close of a period, but the first only with the same letter which they prefix to it.“

I will follow the example of St. Augustine and not insist on this matter of the Hebrew alphabet. Allow me just to mention that in the East there is a certain mystic tradition of the spiritual sense of the letters and of the alphabet. We could mention here the coptic text „De mysteria litterarum“ which starts with the confession of the anonymous author:

“It happened to me once when I was in the desert being constantly devoted to my prayer to God. Once I took the book of Revelation in my hands, which the Blessed John the Theologian had seen in Patmos. And I read it, until I came to the point, when Christ says to John: I am the Alpha and the Omega. (...) I realized immediately: a mystery of God is contained in the letters of the alphabet, and this has not been revealed to us!”

As we are speaking about the Hebrew version of the psalm, we should mention that this idea of the mystical sense of the alphabet can be found of course already in the Jewish Tradition: In the Hebrew Third Book of Henoch Rabbi Yishmael explains how the Almighty created the world:

*“Come, and I will show you
the letters by which heaven and earth were created;
the letters by which oceans and rivers were created;
the letters by which mountains and hills were created;
the letters by which trees and grasses were created;
the letters by which stars and constellations were created;
(...)
the letters by which wisdom and understanding,
knowledge and understanding,
humility and sincerity were created,
which hold the world upright.”*

It seems to me that this idea of the mystical sense of the letters is an attempt to discover the hidden divine order of our world.

STEP THREE

In order not to exceed the allowed time I had to make a choice of our Psalm, to make in a certain way a summary of this biblical text.

It would be appropriate to choose 22 verses (one from each letter of the Hebrew alphabet) but I present to you today 19 verses. Because in our liturgical practice today this psalm is used also in the funeral services, hence, its "funeral" connotation for the average believer.

If you say "amomoi en odo" (i.e. the first three words of the psalm) or just "amomos" to a greek person, he will understand that you speak about the funeral. So we can say that this psalm is the core of the Church's Funeral Service.

But – except these two cases (Midnight prayer and Funeral) – we find the Psalm 118 (119) one more time in the Orthodox Church Year. This third time is on Holy Saturday.

Our psalm is prayed then in its entirety at the Lamentations of the Matins on Great and Holy Saturday, when the Church assembles around the tomb of Christ. (We will come back to that.)

STEP FOUR

Let us read now our text. In the orthodox service it is divided not in 22 parts but in three stases. (The Greek word is STASIS, which means Station, e.g. in modern Greek „bus stop“).



The First Stasis, in Tone 6

(1) Ah, the blameless in the way. Alleluia.

Ἄμωμοι ἐν ὁδῷ. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(12) Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes. Alleluia.

Εὐλογητὸς εἶ Κύριε, δίδαξόν με τὰ δικαιώματά σου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(20) My soul is worn with endless longing for Your judgments at all times. Alleluia.

Ἐπεπόθησεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου τοῦ ἐπιθυμῆσαι τὰ κρίματά σου ἐν παντὶ καιρῷ. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(28) My soul has slumbered from sorrow; strengthen me with Your words. Alleluia.

Ἐνύσταξεν ἡ ψυχὴ μου ἀπὸ ἀκηδίας, βεβαίωσόν με ἐν τοῖς λόγοις σου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(36) Incline my heart unto Your testimonies, and not unto covetousness. Alleluia.

Κλῖνον τὴν καρδίαν μου εἰς τὰ μαρτύριά σου, καὶ μὴ εἰς πλεονεξίαν. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(53) Despair took hold on me because of sinners that forsake Your Law. Alleluia.

Ἀθυμία κατέσχε με ἀπὸ ἀμαρτωλῶν, τῶν ἐγκαταλιμπανόντων τὸν νόμον σου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(63) I am a partaker with all that fear You, and with them that keep Your commandments. Alleluia.

Μέτοχος ἐγὼ εἶμι πάντων τῶν φοβουμένων σε, καὶ τῶν φυλασσόντων τὰς ἐντολάς σου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen. Alleluia.

Δόξα Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ καὶ Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. Ἀμήν. Ἀλληλούϊα.



The Second Stasis, in Tone 5

(73) Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding, and I will learn Your commandments. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Αἱ χεῖρες σου ἐποίησάν με καὶ ἔπλασάν με, συνέτισον με, καὶ μαθήσομαι τὰς ἐντολάς σου. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

(83) For I am become as a bottle in the frost; yet Your statutes I have not forgotten. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Ὅτι ἐγενήθην ὡς ἀσκός ἐν πάχνη, τὰ δικαιώματά σου οὐκ ἐπελαθόμην. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

(94) I am Yours, O save me; for after Your statutes have I sought. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Σός εἶμι ἐγὼ, σῶσόν με, ὅτι τὰ δικαιώματά σου ἐξεζήτησα. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

(102) From Your judgments I have not declined, for You have set a Law for me. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Ἀπὸ τῶν κριμάτων σου οὐκ ἐξέκλινα, ὅτι σὺ ἐνομοθέτησάς με.
Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

(112) I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes, forever, in return for Your mercies. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Ἐκλίνα τὴν καρδίαν μου τοῦ ποιῆσαι τὰ δικαιώματά σου εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα δι' ἀντάμειψιν. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

(126) It is time to serve the Lord; but they have violated Your law. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

Καιρὸς τοῦ ποιῆσαι τῷ Κυρίῳ· διεσκέδασαν τὸν νόμον σου.
Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen. Have mercy on me Lord.

Δόξα Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ καὶ Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. Ἀμήν. Ἐλέησόν με, Κύριε.

Third Stasis, in Tone 8

And have mercy upon me. Alleluia.

Καὶ ἐλέησόν με. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(132) Look upon me, and have mercy on me. According to the judgment of them that love Your Name. Alleluia.

Ἐπίβλεψον ἐπ' ἐμέ καὶ ἐλέησόν με, κατὰ τὸ κριμα τῶν ἀγαπώντων τὸ ὄνομά σου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(141) I am young and accounted as nothing. Your statutes have I not forgotten. Alleluia.

Νεώτερος ἐγὼ εἰμι, καὶ ἐξουδενωμένος, τὰ δικαιώματά σου οὐκ

ἐπελαθόμεν. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(149) Hear my voice, O Lord, according to Your mercy; According to Your judgments quicken me. Alleluia.

Τῆς φωνῆς μου ἄκουσον, Κύριε, κατὰ τὸ ἔλεός σου, κατὰ τὸ κρίμα σου ζῆσόν με. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(161) Princes have persecuted me without a cause, and because of Your words my heart has been afraid. Alleluia.

Ἄρχοντες κατεδίωξαν με δωρεάν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν λόγων σου ἐδειλίασεν ἡ καρδία μου. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(175) My soul shall live, and shall praise You, And Your judgments will help me. Alleluia.

Ζήσεται ἡ ψυχὴ μου καὶ αἰνέσει σε, καὶ τὰ κρίματά σου βοηθήσει μοι. Ἀλληλούϊα.

(176) I have gone astray like a sheep that is lost. Seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commandments. Alleluia.

Ἐπλανήθην ὡς πρόβατον ἀπολωλός· ζήτησον τὸν δοῦλόν σου, ὅτι τὰς ἐντολάς σου οὐκ ἐπελαθόμεν. Ἀλληλούϊα.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen. Alleluia.

Δόξα Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ καὶ Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι· καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. Ἀμήν. Ἀλληλούϊα.

The first thing we may mention while reading or hearing this psalm is the great number of similar expressions for the same item.

We hear about

ἐντολαί	commandments	מִצְוָה mitsvah	v. 63, 73, 176
δικαιώματα	statutes	חֻקִּים chuqqah	v. 12, 83, 94, 112, 141

κρίμα, κρίματα	judgments	מִשְׁפָּט mishpat	v. 20, 102, 132, 149, 175
νόμος	law	תּוֹרָה torah	v. 53, 126
λόγοι	words	דְּבָרִים dabar	v. 28, 161
μαρτύρια	testimonies	עֲדוּתֵי edah	v. 36
(νομοθετώ	set a Law		102)

All these terms speak about the same item: the Law of God.

We could say: the whole psalm is an ode to the power of God's law. The key to its understanding is vv. 1 and 2, for they explain who are the blameless, the blessed people. These people are those who are blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord, who search out his testimonies, and who search for Him with their whole heart.

These statements are described in the literary genre of a dialogue with God. It starts with the description in the third person "Ah, the blameless in the way" (v.1.) and moves to the direct invocation of the Almighty "Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes" (12) until the end of the psalm "Seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commandments" (176).

A dynamic spiritual life and a blameless walk with God is possible only when we are in dialogue with Him.

Now we understand why the Psalm is prayed at the funeral, i.e. when we make a sort of balance of our human life. (And, by the way, every night's mid (midnight) could be also an opportunity for an balance of the day.)

STEP FIVE

But we hear not only about the Law (in it's different connotations), but three times we hear also the word „heart“ (vv.36, 112 and 161)

(36) Incline my heart unto Your testimonies, and not unto covetousness. Alleluia.

(112) I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes, forever, in return for Your mercies. Have mercy on me, O Lord.

(161) Princes have persecuted me without a cause, and because of Your words my heart has been afraid. Alleluia.

We are used to link the law to our mind but usually not to our heart. We have to obey the Law and it is usually a question of our mind, of our brain,

of our "Ratio". If really the Law of God is the main theme of our psalm, we have to ask: what is the relation of our heart to the law? Let's have a look: The first step is: *Incline my heart unto Your testimonies*. And in the same time the psalmist says *I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes*. It means, that even the obedience to the law ("testimonies") is a gift we receive from God and a decision I have to take. It doesn't start exclusively from God and doesn't start exclusively from me. It is a double movement and a mutual movement. And the place where these two movements meet is the heart of man. It is the place where we recognize that everythin we do, we do it "in return for Your mercies". And it is also the place of doubt, of temptation, of fear, and of loneliness. *"and because of Your words my heart has been afraid."*

Yes, could we characterise the heart as the place where my human condition is expressed the most?

What is man, that you are mindful of him? and the son of man, that you visit him? (Ps 8:4) (Translation of the King James 2000 Bible)

STEP SIX

What is man? We find the most accurate answer in our last verse:

(176) I have gone astray like a sheep that is lost. Seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commandments.

That **is** the description of what we are...

The *Conditio humana* is to be a lost sheep

If Martin Luther formulated: "Simul iustus et peccator", here we have the classical biblical definition "simul sheep et lost."

Yes, dear sisters, dear brethren, we are sheep, all of us, because we belong to the same shepherd. And – because like in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – we live always the reestablishing the paternity of God towards us. The relation towards God is not interrupted because, *for I have not forgotten Your commandments*.

Immediately after the end of our Psalm, in the Orthodox funeral service we repeat this idea of the lost sheep and sing:

„Blessed are You, O Lord; teach me Your statutes.

The Choir of the Saints has found the Fountain of Life, and the Door of Paradise. May I also find the way through repentance: the sheep that was lost am I; call me up to You, O Savior, and save me."

(Please note: This statement is double: the dead and the living participants in the funeral say it in the same way)

By the way: In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas I found the following Saying (107):

"Jesus said: The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep; one of them, the biggest, went astray; he left (the) ninety-nine (and) sought after the one until he found it. After he had laboured, he said to the sheep: I love you more than the ninety-nine."

STEP SEVEN

May I suggest one more approach to our psalm: the christological reading. You may ask: It is allowed to read an Old Testament text in a christological way? And I will answer: If you are in love, everything smells of love; if you you are in Christ, everything smells of Christ.

Alexander Schmemmann writes: „In early liturgical tradition this Psalm was one of the essential parts of the Sunday vigil, the weekly commemoration of Christ's Resurrection. Its content is not 'funeral' at all. This psalm is the purest and the fullest expression of love for the law of God, i.e., for the Divine design of man and of his life. The real life, the one which man lost through sin, consists in keeping, in fulfilling the Divine law, that life with God, in God and for God, for which man was created.

"In the way of thy testimonies I delight as much as in all riches." (Verse 14)

"I will delight in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word." (Verse 16)

And since Christ is the image of a perfect fulfillment of this law, since His whole life had no other "content" but the fulfillment of His Father's will, the Church interprets this psalm as the words of Christ Himself, spoken to His Father from the grave.

"Consider how I love thy precepts! Quicken me, O Lord, according to thy loving kindness." (Verse 159)

The death of Christ is the ultimate proof of His love for the will of God, of His obedience to His Father. It is an act of pure obedience, of full trust in the Father's will; and for the Church it is precisely this obedience to the end, this perfect humility of the Son that constitutes the foundation, the beginning of His victory. The Father desires this death, the Son accepts it,

revealing an unconditional faith in the perfection of the Father's will, in the necessity of this sacrifice of the Son by the Father.

Psalm 118 is the psalm of that obedience, and therefore the announcement that in obedience the triumph has begun...

For this death was to be either the last triumph of Satan, or his decisive defeat. The duel develops in several stages. At first, the forces of evil seem to triumph. The Righteous One is crucified, abandoned by all, and endures a shameful death. He also becomes the partaker of "Hades," of this place of darkness and despair... But at this very moment, the real meaning of this death is revealed. The One who dies on the Cross has Life in Himself, i.e., He has life not as a gift from outside, a gift which therefore can be taken away from Him, but as His own essence. For He is the Life and the Source of all life. "In Him was Life and Life was the light of man." The man Jesus dies, but this Man is the Son of God. As man, He can really die, but in Him, God Himself enters the realm of death, partakes of death. This is the unique, the incomparable meaning of Christ's death.

In it, the man who dies is God or, to be more exact, the God-man. God is the Holy Immortal; and only in the unity "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" of God and Man in Christ can human death be "assumed" by God and be overcome and destroyed from within, be "trampled down by death..."

Christ freely accepts death, of His life He says that "no one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord." (John 10:18) He does it not without a fight: "and He began to be sorrowful and troubled." (Matthew 26:37) Here is fulfilled the measure of His obedience, and therefore, here is the destruction of the moral root of death, of death as the ransom for sin. The whole life of Jesus is in God as every human life ought to be, and it is this fullness of Life, this life full of meaning and content, full of God, that overcomes death, destroys its power. For death is, above all, a lack of life, a destruction of life that has cut itself from its only source. And because Christ's death is a movement of love towards God, an act of obedience and trust, of faith and perfection – it is an act of life (Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit – Luke 23:46) which destroys death. It is the death of death itself...

Such is the meaning of Christ's descent into Hades, of His death becoming His victory. And the light of this victory now illumines our vigil before the Grave.

"How, O Life, canst Thou die? Or abide in a grave. For Thou dost destroy the kingdom of death, O Lord, and Thou raisest up the dead of Hades realm."

"In a grave they laid Thee, O my Life and my Christ. Yet behold now, by Thy death, death is stricken down, and Thou pourest forth life's streams for all the world."

"O, how full that joy was! O, how great that delight! Wherewith Thou didst fill all them that were held by Hades, when Thou shonest forth Thy light in those dark depths." (Alexander Schmemmann, A Liturgical Explanation Of The Holy Week)¹

STEP EIGHT

The final perspective of our psalm is given in its verse 126: „*It is time to serve the Lord.*“ It is interesting that in the Greek Text it is not written "to serve" but *Καιρός τοῦ ποιῆσαι τῷ Κυρίῳ* and *τοῦ ποιῆσαι* means „to do, to work“.

Here we are confronted with an interesting question: who must do, who must work?

If we look in different translations of this verse, we will find different answers: The French Bible de Jérusalem (Psaumes 119:126) states: „Il est temps que l'Éternel agisse“. Another french translation gives the same interpretation: „Il est temps d'agir pour toi, Eternel, car on viole ta loi.“ More clever is the spanish translation which allows both interpretations: „Tiempo es de actuar, oh Jehová, Porque han invalidado tu ley.“

We, the Orthodox, use it in the sense that we must work and worship. In the beginning of the eucharistic assembly, the Divine Liturgy, every divine Liturgy, it is used when the deacon says to the celebrating priest „*Καιρός τοῦ ποιῆσαι τῷ Κυρίῳ* – It is time to serve the Lord.“

It is time for action. Time for the oikoumene, time for the secretaries of the NCCs, it is time "to discover the hidden divine order of our world". Amen and Halleluyah!

¹ <http://holytrinityorthodox.org/lent/A-Liturgical-Explanation-of-Holy-Week.pdf>