

Catechism Seminar: Eight Essential Prayers
February 8, 2022
Psalm 50: A Prayer of Repentance

“Some monks called Euchites, or “men of prayer,” once came to Abba Lucius in the ninth region of Alexandria. And the old man asked them, “what work do you do with your hands?” And they said, “we do not work with our hands. We obey St. Paul’s command and pray without ceasing.” The old man said to them, “do you not eat?” They said, “yes, we eat.” And the old man said to them, “when you are eating, who prays for you?” Again, he asked them, “do you not sleep?” They said, “we sleep.” The old man said, “who prays for you while you are asleep?” They would not answer him. And he said to them, “forgive me, brothers, but you do not practice what you say. I will show you how I pray without ceasing though I work with my hands. With God’s help, I sit and collect a few palm leaves, and interweave them and say, ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy: and according to the multitude of your mercies do away with my iniquity.’” And he said to them, “is that prayer, or is it not?” They said, “it is prayer.”

- Sayings of the Desert Fathers 12.9

English rendering from *The Orthodox Study Bible* (translated from the 3rd & 2nd centuries B.C. LXX/Septuagint; that is the earliest surviving Greek translation from the original Hebrew):

PSALM 50

¹ *For the End; a psalm by David;*

² *when Nathan the prophet came to him, at the time he went in to Bathsheba.*

³ Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your great mercy;

And according to the abundance of Your compassion, blot out my transgression.

⁴ Wash me thoroughly from my lawlessness,

And cleanse me from my sin.

⁵ For I know my lawlessness,

And my sin is always before me.

⁶ Against You only have I sinned,

And done evil in Your sight;

That You may be found justified in Your words,

And overcome when You are judged.

⁷ For behold, I was conceived in transgressions,

And in sins my mother bore me.

⁸ Behold, You love truth;

You showed me the unknown and

secret things of Your wisdom.

⁹ You shall sprinkle me with hyssop,

and I will be cleansed;
 You shall wash me, and I will be made whiter than snow.
¹⁰ You shall make me hear joy and gladness;
 My bones that were humbled shall greatly rejoice.
¹¹ Turn Your face from my sins,
 And blot out all my transgressions.
¹² Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 And renew a right spirit within me.
¹³ Do not cast me away from Your presence,
 And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
¹⁴ Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,
 And uphold me with your guiding Spirit.
¹⁵ I will teach transgressors Your ways,
 And the ungodly shall turn back to You.
¹⁶ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness,
 O God, the God of my salvation,
 And my tongue shall greatly rejoice in Your righteousness.
¹⁷ O Lord, You shall open my lips,
 And my mouth will declare Your praise.
¹⁸ For if You had desired sacrifice, I would give it;
 You will not be pleased with whole burnt offerings.
¹⁹ A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit,
 A broken and humbled heart God not despise.
²⁰ Do good, O Lord, in Your good pleasure to Zion,
 And let the walls of Jerusalem be built;
²¹ Then You will be pleased with a sacrifice of righteousness,
 With offerings and whole burnt offerings;
 Then shall they offer young bulls on Your altar.

Notes

- Psalm 50 is numbered 51 in the MT/Masoretic Text (the authoritative Hebrew translation of the Scripture; written c. 7th-10th centuries A.D., and collected c. 11th century A.D.)
- Use of chapters and numbers a much later addition: See Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton (13th century), Rabbi Isaac Nathan ben Kalonymus (15th Century), Italian Dominican biblical scholar Santes Pagnino (16th century), French scholar, Robert Estienne (16th century), etc.

Liturgy

- Used in the daily services of Orthros, Third Hour, Compline, and at every Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

- The use of the Psalms/Psalter was central to worship and liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church.

History

- II Book of Kingdoms 11 & 12 (LXX): Story of King David & Bathsheba

Psalm 50 [51] shows the complete repentance of a sinner when David, who had gone into Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite and was rebuked by the prophet Nathan, said, “I have sinned.” Immediately he deserved to hear “The Lord has removed your sin from you.” For he, who had added homicide to adultery and was moved to tears, said, “God, have compassion on me according to your great pity, and according to the multitude of your mercies take away my iniquity.” Since a great sin needed great mercy, he added, “Wash me completely from my iniquity, and my offense is always before me. I have sinned against you only” – for a king did not fear anyone else – “and I have done evil in your sight so that you will be justified in your speaking and you overcome when you judge.” “For God has included all things under sin so that he may be merciful to all.” He made so much progress that he who a little earlier had been a penitent sinner became a master and was able to say, “I will teach the unjust your ways, and sinners will be converted to you.” Since confession and beauty are before God, the one who confesses his sins and says, “My wounds have been destroyed and become putrefied,” changes the foulness of his wounds into a healthy state.

- St. Jerome, *Letter 122.3*

Translation footnotes from Robert Alter’s, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3, The Writings* (using the Hebrew Masoretic text):

- 2. *Upon Nathan the prophet’s coming to him when he had come to bed with Bathsheba.* The superscription incorporates a barbed pun. The Hebrew verb used for both Nathan and David is “to come to” (or “into”), but in the former instance it refers to the prophet’s entering the king’s chambers, whereas the latter instance reflects its sexual sense, to have intercourse with a woman (probably intercourse for the first time). The strong character of this poem as a confessional psalm led the editors to attribute it to David when he was stricken with remorse after Nathan rebuked him for sleeping with Bathsheba and murdering her husband (II Samuel 12). But in all likelihood, this song is a general penitential song composed centuries after David. If the reference to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in the penultimate verse is an integral part of the original psalm and not an editorial edition, a text would have to date to sometime after 586 B.C. In any case, the idea of offering God a broken spirit instead of sacrifice looks as though it may have been influenced by the later prophetic literature. The eloquent confessional mode of this song has made it an important liturgical vehicle for both Christians and Jews. It is one of the seven penitential psalms in church ritual. The wrenching plea of verse 13 is used in the introduction to the penitential prayer during the Jewish Days of Awe.

- 7. *in transgression was I conceived, / and in offense my mother spawned me.* Some Christian interpreters through the ages have understood this verse is a prime expression of the doctrine of Original Sin. Some of the early rabbis register a similar notion– as they put it, David’s father, Jesse, did not have relations with his wife to fulfill a higher obligation but rather out of sheer lust. Such a reading may be encouraged by the fact that the verb attached to the mother, *yaham*, is typically associated with animals in heat. It may, however, be unwarranted to construct a general theology of simple human nature from this verse. The speaker of the poem certainly feels permeated with sinfulness. He may indeed trace it back to the sexual act through which he was conceived, but there is not much here to support the idea that this is the case of every human born.
- 8. *You desire truth in what is hidden.* This whole verse is the one line in the poem that is rather obscure. The meaning of *batuhot*, “what’s hidden,” or “hidden things,” is not certain. Traditional commentators generally think it refers to the inner organs. It is unclear what the line as a whole means to say– perhaps that the speaker feels he may harbor guilt for transgressions of which he is not consciously aware, and ask God to reveal these to him.
- 9. *Purify me with a hyssop.* Hyssop was used in a ritual of purification. The priest dipped the hyssop branch in the blood of a sacrificial animal, then sprinkled it on the impure object or person to expunge the impurity (see Leviticus 14). (The fine hairs on hyssop leaves may have prevented the blood from congealing.) Alternatively, hyssop was used to sprinkle water (Numbers 19:18–22) to remove impurities. The claim made by some scholars that this psalm is there for a liturgical text for a rite of purification is not all together convincing because hyssop, familiar to the audience from such ceremonies, could easily have been invoked is a symbol of a process of purification that is spiritual, not ritual, in nature. Such a move from ritual the spiritual is strongly etched in verses 18 and 19.
Wash me, that I be whiter than snow. The same image is used in Isaiah 1:18.

From the Church Fathers:

After this white robes were given to you as a sign that you were putting off the covering of sins and putting on the chaste veil of innocence, of which the prophet said, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed; wash me, and I shall be made whiter than snow.” For one who is baptized is seen to be purified according to the law and according to the gospel: according to the law, because Moses sprinkled the blood of the lamb with a bunch of hyssop; according to the gospel, because Christ’s garments were white as snow, when in the Gospel he showed forth the glory of his resurrection. One, then, whose guilt is forgiven is made whiter than snow. Thus God said through Isaiah: “Though your sins are as scarlet, I will make them white as snow.”

- 19. *God's sacrifices— a broken spirit, / A broken, crushed heart God spurns not.* Although Isaiah and Micah equally stress that what God requires of man is not animal sacrifices but ethical behavior, here there is an arresting new emphasis on an inward condition of contrition. It is a person's remorse over past actions, or perhaps simply his authentic grief over his desperate plight, that God accepts instead of sacrifice.
- 20. *Show goodness in your pleasure to Zion, / rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.* The poem until this moment at the end has been entirely concerned with the remorseful confession of an individual, so this prayer for the rebuilding of Jerusalem looks suspiciously like a conclusion added by an editor.
- 21. *Then shall You desire just sacrifices.* In the rebuilt Jerusalem— this would seem to be the specific implication of the repeated “then”— with, we may infer, a rebuilt temple, it will once again be possible to offer sacrifices. The single word “just” might by a stretch harmonize this concluding verse with 18 and 19, but it seems more likely that an editor, uneasy with the outright rejection or at least downgrading of sacrifices expressed in the psalm, added this line at the end to reaffirm the idea that God desires sacrifices, at least if they are just ones.

From the Church Fathers:

But how shall a person find Grace with God? How else, except by lowliness of mind? For “God,” James says, “resists the proud but gives grace to the humble;” and “the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit, and a heart that is brought low God will not despise.” For if humility is so lovely to human beings, it is much more so with God. Thus both the Gentiles found grace and the Jews did not fall from grace in any other way, “for they were not subject to the righteousness of God.” The lowly person of whom I am speaking is pleasing and delightful to all people, and dwells in continual peace and has in him no ground for contentions. For even if you insult him, even if you abuse him, whatever you say, he will be silent and bear it meekly; he will have so great a peace toward all people that one cannot even describe it. Yes, and with God also. For the Commandments of God are to be at peace with human beings: and thus our whole life is made prosperous, through peace one with another.

- St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on I Corinthians* 1:4

Doctrinal/Theological Points

Original Sin, Inherited Guilt

- *in sin my mother conceived me*. Orthodoxy does not share a tradition of original sin as “inherited guilt” like western Christianity.

“Sacrifice”

- “Sacrifice,” as reconciliation and purification, meaning to draw close. The Hebrew word *qaravan* and the Aramaic word *dabacha* are rooted in the Hebrew word *qarav* which means to *approach*. A penitential return to God- not to appease some divine wrath.
- False dichotomy between temple and prophetic, ethical and ritual tradition.

From Fr. Patrick Henry Reardon’s, *Christ in the Psalms*:

It is not by accident nor without significance that Psalm 50 (Hebrew 51) is the only psalm prescribed to be recited in its entirety during every celebration of the Eastern Orthodox Divine Liturgy. Whether in the Liturgy of St. Basil or St. John Chrysostom, it is the prayer of a murderer and adulterer that the priest must pray when the congregation commences singing the Cherubic Hymn in preparation for the “Great Entrance” of the Holy Gifts. At that moment, the priest takes the sensor and starts sensing the entire sanctuary area. While he does this, he says (and is expected to know it by heart) the whole song that begins, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy.” It is chiefly this eucharistic context, I submit, that provides the proper avenue to the deep meaning of that psalm popularly known (from the first word of its Latin version) as the *Miserere*. It is a psalm in which, using the words of that great sinner David, one prays for God’s mercy and forgiveness.

At the Great Entrance, we stand at the threshold of theophany: “Let us, who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all, who comes invisibly upborne by the angelic hosts.” At that point we are just moments away from chanting the hymn that Isaiah and St. John heard chanted by the seraphim (“fiery ones”) at the throne of God: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts...” It is at that awesome moment that we think of our sinfulness and say, as did Isaiah at that moment, “Woe is me, for I am undone! / Because I am a man of unclean lips, / And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; / For my eyes have seen the King, / The Lord of hosts“ (Isaiah 6:5). The true sense of our sinfulness does not come from measuring the distance between our own conduct and the grandeur of the moral law. Oh no, it is only in the overwhelming presence of the Holy One Himself that we sinners know how utterly sinful we are.

Such as sinner was Job. In chapter after chapter of the dramatic book that bears his name, Job kept arguing that he was an innocent man, that he was suffering unjustly, that he did not deserve to be punished, and so forth. But then God abruptly reveals himself to Job,

who now finds himself standing naked in the presence of the Holy One, and suddenly Job is a man of altered mind. No more can he claim innocence. Never again can he point to some alleged purity of his conscience. The pretense is over. Job must simply repent: "I have heard of you by the hearing of the ear, / But now my eyes see you. / Therefore I abhor myself, / And repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5).

This overwhelming holiness of God, the source of profound repentance, is particularly related to the coming of the Holy Spirit, for it is our pride and sinfulness that grieve and impede the operation of God's sanctifying spirit.

Once again, the eucharistic context provides an illustration. The recitation of the *Miserere* is a preparation for the praying of the epiklesis, that solemn prayer for the sending down of the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Before he ever begins that awesome invocation, the priest is made to say: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit for me."

... It is this strong sense of the holiness of the face of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit that keeps the *Miserere* from being morbid or morose. "Wash me yet more from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" is the proper concomitant to "Heaven and earth are full of your glory." "Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities" is our condign answer to "God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts."

Continued repentance is the appropriate response to ongoing theophany. Since we are all "with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18), we do not cease to pray, over and over: "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."