

Prison Visit Report

The Psalter is about Christ

The Psalter teaches us how to pray

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Praying in the name of Jesus

Forgive, forget, move on

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(We visit 5 prisons regularly, and have monthly expenses exceeding one thousand dollars)

I visited three prisons in two days as is currently my custom two of the four weeks of every month. This will change soon as I will add another prison, when I'm going home on Thursday. That will mean that I visit 2 prisons on Wednesday, stay overnight in Huntsville, and visit 2 more on Thursday before I go back home. The other two weeks of the month, I just visit the unit. That's almost like not working.

When I teach, I try to as much as possible do the same thing in each unit and take notes. There is always something I learn from those I teach. The following is a summary, and amplification of the things we talked about.

I decided I wanted to teach first about the Psalter, and especially Psalm 1, and then begin teaching from Bishop Ignatius Briachaninov's incredible book called "The Field" (note: although we talked about "The Field", this report does not include anything about those talks, because there is only so much time and room to discuss the things that happened. Perhaps another time, because there was much that was very edifying in our talk about this book). Pretty much everyone who loves the Scripture should get this book. It will help very much to increase your understanding of Scripture. St Ignatius always emphasizes the moral component of Scripture. **What is the point about learning things if we do not apply them?** St. Ignatius always is applying the words of the Gospel to how we should live. We are going through it in our parish Monday nights after Vespers, or during Great Lent, after Great Compline. We are making good progress in it, because Deacon Nicholas is teaching, and not me. I don't keep things moving along as well as he does.

I have distributed Psalters to many of the men, and I need to buy another set of them to distribute more. I distribute the "Boston Psalter" to them, because **it is especially important to recognize that the Psalter is a poetic book, and also a liturgical book.** Reading the Psalms from some Bible that does not recognize the poetry well is not as useful to the soul.

For centuries, the church's personal prayer book was only the Psalter. Now we have prayer books, which are basically abbreviations of canonical services in the Horologion (the Horologion means "Book of the Hours", and contains the services done every day, Midnight Office, Vespers, Matins, etc.). Many people only know morning and evening prayers and have no idea that **the church has always considered the Psalter to be the model for how to pray.** You cannot find a church service that does not have either entire Psalms verbatim or parts of Psalms or allusions to them. They are truly ubiquitous.

The Orthodox Psalter is divided into 20 chapters. We call these "Kathismas" because when they are read in the church people sit and that Greek word means sit. Each Kathisma is divided into three subsections, each of which we call a "stasis".

It is a very good personal rule to read some Psalms every day and read in such a way that you read the entire Psalter in some fixed period of time.

The Psalter is about Jesus Christ. Many of the Psalms describe Him, and many of them are actually His words. Of course, by His words I mean not that He said them explicitly, but that they are in His person. The Psalter also describes every emotional and spiritual state of man, and the solution to those conditions. **It teaches us how to approach God in prayer.** There is humility in the Psalms. There is also zeal, and forcefulness, and even complaining. It is not wrong to tell God what is wrong, but we must tell Him in a particular way. The Psalms show us this way. The Psalms show that for every problem, God is the only solution.

It is truly impossible to consider any of the church's prayer without understanding that it is shaped by the Psalter.

Psalm 1 – Blessed is the man.

This Psalm is called: **“Blessed is the man”**, because those are the first few words of the Psalm. We name many prayers by their first few words. Another example would be the “Our Father”.

This Psalm is a description of Jesus Christ. It is also a description of the way of life that leads to eternal life.

The Psalm begins: **“Blessed is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the pestilent.”** 1:1.

There is a story from the Desert Fathers of a man who heard this verse and immediately left to go into the desert in order to learn what it means and didn't come back until 20 years later. Truly, the entire Gospel and the entire way of “life” is encapsulated in this verse. The character of Jesus Christ is also described in this verse.

The Psalter is full of beautiful Hebrew poetry. A very common aspect of Hebrew poetry is something called a couplet. When something is said, it is said again, in a slightly different way. Our Lord preached with many couplets. They are all over the Scriptures. Sometimes in a couplet, something is said and then the opposite of it is said.

Here is an example of a couplet. “Have mercy and me, O God according to thy great mercy, and according to the multitude of thy compassions blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 50:1). Here, David is asking for mercy and then is asking for mercy again in a more exact way - “blot out my transgressions”.

An example of a couplet in which the opposite is said is right from this Psalm: **“For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish.”** (Psalm 1:6) Certainly those whom the Lord does not “know” are those who perish.

Every verse in this Psalm is a couplet, or “more”. The first verse of this Psalm is actually a triplet. It also shows a progression of how to live righteously, and if we take it in another sense, how those who are sinners do not live, and how sin grows in us.

All sins come from a progression of thought

There is always a progression in our souls when we sin. All sin starts with thought. There are many thoughts in our minds. Some of them are from our own mind, some are because of our passions, others are from outside and suggested from other people or from demons, or in the case of good thoughts, from the Holy Spirit and our Guardian Angel.

When a sinful thought is suggested to our mind, we can reject it out of hand, or begin to, as the Father's say “entertain” it. It is always safest to reject a sinful thought immediately. Those who are practiced in the spiritual life may reject a sinful thought before even becoming aware of it. Others, such as our sinful selves, may recognize a sinful thought, and then reject it. Once we become aware of the thought and we have not rejected it outright, our mind begins to consider it. If we consider it for too long, our passions will feel an attraction to it, and then give into it. It is possible to reject a thought after considering it, and even after feeling an attraction to it, but the latter becomes harder to do, close to impossible.

The Psalm is describing the progression of sinful thoughts in the soul before we actually sin. Three levels of association are given, each one an increase over the other. One level of association is **walking** with something that is sinful, that is, at least allowing it into the heart to be considered. Another is to **stand** with something sinful; that indicates, if not acceptance, the beginning of acceptance of the thought. When we have fully accepted the thought, we **sit** down with it.

Of course, we are in the world, and we are all around sinful things. If we decided we would not be around any sinners, we would not go to work, nor would we shop at any store, nor would we even tolerate being around ourselves and our family. It is not a sin to be around people that are sinful, but it is a sin to walk with them, to stand with them, and to sit with them. We are Christians and we should only accept the things that are just and good and honest and holy. It is important to recognize that the choices we make may lead to worse choices. Walking with sinners will inevitably lead to standing with them and finally sitting down with them.

Certainly, Jesus Christ, who sought out sinners and talked to them and helped them, never walked with them, nor stood with them, nor sat with them. St. Paul tells us that He was like us in all ways, except that He did not sin. This is how we should act also. Of course, this is a high bar, and quite impossible for us in this life, at least in our current sinful condition. That is no excuse for us, however. We believe that there are men and women who actually became completely purified even in this life. They took the words of this Psalm to heart.

The second verse introduces the law of the Lord, something much misunderstood in our day. It says:” **But his will is rather in the law of the Lord, and in His law will he meditate day and night.**” (1:2)

Certainly, this describes the character of our Lord Jesus Christ, Whose will was always to obey His Father. He meditated on the law, day and night.

In our benighted world, law is thought of as something that is imposed on a person as a punishment. Even people who believe in Christ believe that God’s law is something that punishes. There are many that believe that God’s law, and His absolute holiness forced Him to find a pure perfect sacrifice that would pay the punishment that is inevitable when one breaks the law. This is called the so-called “substitutionary atonement”, a new idea of only a few hundred years, and quite foreign to Orthodox theology. We do not believe that Jesus Christ came in order to be punished so that we would not be punished. We believe that He came in order for us to be able to defeat death and be healed.

The law of God is actually a reflection of Who God is. Since we are made in God’s image, we are like Him in some way, and it stands to reason that the only way to live that will bring us happiness and growth is to live according to His law, because **following His law is natural to the image of God that is within us.** This is why we follow the law of God – to love our neighbor, to forgive, do not steal, to not fornicate, and all the other things that are spoken of in the Scripture. None of these things are external commands that are imposed upon us. They were all the way of life because they are reflections of who God is.

Many people have the idea that meditation is to sit down and think about something. Sometimes they use their imagination, and this is something that the church has always considered to be dangerous. If we want to meditate upon God’s law, we should first try to follow it, and also read it and pray it. **There is no better way to read about God’s law and to pray it than to read the Psalter with attention.** This is a kind of meditation upon God’s law. Of course, if we read without the intent to do, there is no meditation upon the law, but merely a blasphemous wasting of time.

Our Lord Jesus Christ meditated on the law by following it perfectly. We also should attempt to do this. That is the primary way we meditate upon the law.

The next verse is not only a description of how our Lord lived on this earth, but also a promise of baptism and resurrection. The verse says this: **“And he shall be like the tree which is planted by the streams of the waters, which shall bring forth its fruit in its season; and its leaf shall not fall, and all things whatsoever he may do shall prosper.”** 1:3

Of course, the primary task of Jesus Christ was to live, and die, and resurrect so that we could be resurrected. He had other aims also: the showing of the way to live by example, the gathering of disciples, the forming of the church. Truly in all these things, He prospered.

We are also that tree that is planted by the streams of the waters, that new creature that arises out of the waters of baptism, and we are also called to bring forth fruit in its season. The promise of baptism, if we try to live righteously, is that our leaf shall not fall. A leaf falls when it dies. Death is defeated by Jesus Christ. Even though our flesh will likely die, in the next life we will be resurrected and be with the Lord.

Verse four describes the ungodly, but we make a huge mistake if we think it does not also describe things that *we do*.

“Not so are the ungodly, not so; but rather they are like the chaff which the wind doth hurl away from the face of the earth. For this reason shall the ungodly not stand up in judgement, nor sinners in the council of the righteous.” (1:4,5)

The chaff is useless (inedible) material that encapsulates the wheat. It is removed by throwing the wheat into the air on a windy day, and the lighter chaff is blown away, while the heavier wheat falls down directly to the ground. Anytime we do things that are sinful, or our own will, we are doing things that are chaff. We should attempt to do things that are permanent. The only permanent things are things that are according to the law of God.

“For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly shall perish.” 1:6

The last verse is a promise to the righteous and to the wicked. The wicked will perish, but the Lord “will know the way of the righteous”. This is an intimate word – “know”. A person cannot know someone without becoming like them in some way and sharing in their life. It is also this way with God. We cannot know Him unless we become like Him. The entire reason for the incarnation, the passion, the resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit and the formation of the church is so that we can become like God and know Him.

Praying in the name of Jesus.

A question was asked about “praying in the name of Jesus”, something that is very common among Protestants. It comes from a very literal, almost magical interpretation of a promise of Jesus in the Gospel: “Whatever you ask in My name I will do it”.

There are many verses in the Gospel that have this promise – that Jesus will respond to a prayer “in His name”. The Protestants, and unfortunately, others that do not understand the Patristic teaching and mind of the church take references like the following in a literal, mechanistic way:

“Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. (20) For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mat 18:19-20)

“And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. (14) If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.” (John 14:13-14)

“And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. (24) Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:23-24)

The actual meaning of Jesus’ promise is that if we ask according to His will and are attempting to live according to His will, then He will help us. He was not directing us to add a suffix to some long extemporaneous prayer of: “in Jesus’ name we pray”.

Prayer is always connected with our faith, and our conduct which should be based upon our faith. If we have faith in God, that means that we wish to follow God’s commandments and we repent when we do not follow them. It means that we look at life in a spiritual way, and not a material way. All these things are necessary in order to pray in Jesus’ name. It is not a formula, it is a way of life. Nothing in life can be reduced to a formula.

There are other Scriptures that tell us that Jesus will do the things that we pray, but they are much different than the ones above. They do not lend themselves to a formula. For instance:

“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.” (John 15:7)

Note, above, the Lord promises us that He will do what we ask if we abide in Him. This is much more than just adding “in Jesus, name” to the end of a prayer

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. (17) These things I command you, that ye love one another. (John 15:16-17)

Note, above, the Lord says that He will do what we ask in His name, **AND** He surrounds this promise with the expectation that we will bring forth fruit that is permanent and eternal, and also that we will love each other. The inference is that if we do not bring forth fruit, and we do not love, we can have no expectation that God will hear our prayers. Perhaps this sounds very harsh to you, because you feel that you’re not bringing forth fruit that is eternal. With God all things are possible. Many times God somehow sees our desire and our effort as a result. Even though we are still sinners, if we are struggling to follow God’s commandments, then God counts this effort as enough to hear at least some of our prayers.

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. (6) But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. (7) For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.” (James 1:5-7)

St. James, the brother of our Lord, teaches that we must ask in faith in order to receive what we wish. This is not a popular view nowadays, when popular culture likes things reduced to slogans and formulas. Certainly, the Brother of the Lord would not be popular in today’s popular culture because he tells us that we cannot expect to receive anything of God if we do not ask with faith. Of course, **faith is not just believing stuff – it is doing stuff based upon what we believe, it is ordering our life according to what we say we believe.**

“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us.” (1John 5:14)

This last reference from St. John teaches that we must pray according to God’s will. Again, this command cannot be reduced to a formula that we add at the end of a prayer – it is an entire way of life.

Sometimes people are confused by this. They wonder how can we know God’s will. If a person struggles to live according to God’s will, eventually he will know God’s will. Until we are perfected, or at least become more perfect, we must struggle in obedience and in submission and in repentance, and certainly all of these things are according to God’s will. When we pray, if we are struggling, we can have some small confidence at least that God will hear our prayers.

I personally think that it is really not important whether or not we believe in a specific instance that God has heard our prayers. That is certainly not a monastic idea. The perfect monastic idea is that even if a person prays for something and it happens, he attributes this answer to the prayers of someone else, such as his spiritual father, or someone else he has not even heard of, and not because of his own prayers, because he is a sinner. We can pray with confidence, but not confidence in ourselves. We must have confidence in God and in His mercy. It really doesn’t matter whether or not God listens directly to our prayer or to the prayer of someone else or our Guardian Angel or one of the saints. It only matters that we will be being taken care of by God because He loves us.

Of course, we do pray using Jesus name, and for everyone this should be a very common prayer. The Jesus prayer is: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”. We believe there is great power in this prayer – not because of just using the name Jesus but because we are praying to Jesus, and also struggling to live as Jesus taught us to live. Everyone should pray the Jesus prayer as much as possible.

Forgive, forget, move on

According to God's inscrutable ways He has decided that Marina and I should encounter many people who have had intense grief from personal losses, including the loss of children. We had no idea this was going to happen, but it has happened often since the death of our son [+Daniel in June 11, 2017](#). There are two men that I see, who have lost sons. One of them (whose son died because of criminal neglect after an accident) told me that there are classes that he takes and the subject of forgiveness was approached. It was reduced to a formula: "forgive, forget, move on". This is ridiculous advice.

The world thinks that we must get over being wronged by somehow having our feelings magically change, or by waiting for time to elapse. Our feelings do not change magically; they change because of our labor, and of course, by God's mercy.

When we are wronged, we end up having thoughts that are dark and terrible. We are full of anger, or we have internal conversations with our adversary, or we even envision circumstances that make us happy regarding their fate. All of these things are suggestions of the devil. We are called to forgive everyone, and this does not happen because we try to forget the person who hurt us, or the unjust circumstances that occurred and hurt us. It happens because we transform something bad that happened to us that was wrong or painful into something positive.

At the very least, we must pray for someone who has wronged us. This is not "forgetting." This is "remembering", every single day. We can do other things also, especially if praying for the person who has wronged us does not help us completely remove bad thoughts about them. Of course, we should not rehearse in our minds terrible things that have happened to us, but we should remember those that have done those things and pray for them as well as we can. Eventually, our prayers will turn our hearts into soft hearts that will have no anger.

Forgiveness is not magical. Forgiveness is work. If we would think for a moment: since the Lord says if we do not forgive we will not be forgiven, certainly the evil one would work without relenting to try to get us to be angry at those who have hurt us. Therefore, forgiveness is not easy, because it is always spiritual warfare. It is not a formula, it must be a way of life based on faith in Christ.

My visits to prison are always extremely rich. There was much more that we talked about, but there is not so much time for me to write about what we talked about. This will have to be enough.

"In the words of the psalmist, 'As you lie in bed, repent of what you say in your heart' (Ps. 4:4 LXX), that is, repent in the stillness of the night, remembering the lapses that occurred in the confusion of the day and disciplining yourself in hymns and spiritual songs (cf. Col. 3:16) – in other words, teaching yourself to persist in prayer and psalmody through attentive meditation on what you read. For the practice of the moral virtues is effectuated by meditating on what has happened during the day, so that during the stillness of the night we can become aware of the sins we have committed and can grieve over them." + St. Peter of Damaskos, "Twenty-Four Discourses", XXII Joy, [*The Philokalia: The Complete Text \(Vol. 3\)*](#)

"Teach him to sing those psalms which are so full of love of wisdom; as at once concerning chastity or rather, before all, of not companying with the wicked, immediately with the very beginning of the book; (for therefore also it was that that prophet began on this wise, 'Blessed is the man that hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly'; Ps. i. I, and again, 'I have not say in the council of vanity'; Ps. xxvi. 4, Sept., and again, 'in his sight a wicked doer is contemned, but he honoreth those that fear the Lord,' Ps. xv. 4, Sept.,) of companying the good, (and these subjects thou wilt find there in abundance,) of restraining the belly, of restraining the hand, of refraining from excess, of not overreaching; that money is nothing nor glory, and other things such like[...]. When in these thou hast led him on from childhood, by little and little thou wilt lead him forward even to the higher things. The Psalms contain things, but the Hymns again have nothing human. When he has been instructed out of the Psalms, he will then know hymns also, as a diviner thing." — St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, Homily 9