
Great Vespers: Orthodox Evening Worship

"And the evening and the morning were the first day." (Gen 1:5) Orthodox Christians still count the days in accordance with the Old Testament story of creation. The liturgical day, therefore, begins in the evening. Vespers is the service which begins the daily cycle of worship - e.g., Saturday evening Vespers is the first service of Sunday.

As the world falls into darkness, a natural theme for evening worship is the need and anticipation of light. Vespers speaks of our hope in Christ, the Light of the World, Who enlightens a world darkened by sin.

Most of the hymns of Vespers are either directly from, or references to, the Old Testament. These all reflect the sense of longing for the Light that God's People held in their hearts while waiting for the Messiah, the True Light.

Psalm 103

The first major hymn of Vespers is Psalm 103, a hymn of praise to God the Creator: "How glorious are Your works, O Lord. In wisdom have You made them all." This hymn reflects the blessed state of humanity at the creation of the world, when God first said, "Let there be light!" This holy state does not last long, though. Soon humanity rebelled against God and was cast out of Eden. The Royal Doors of the iconostas are closed and the priest comes to stand in front of them, like Adam lamenting outside the gates of Paradise. Prayer before the Royal Doors continues after Psalm 103, with the Great Litany — or "Litany of Peace".

The Psalms (Kathisma)

After the Great Litany, a series of Psalms

are chanted. Occasionally selected verses are chanted in a shorter, composite hymn.

On Saturday evenings, Psalms 1 to 8 are prescribed. "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly." (Ps. 1:1). "The Man" referred to here is a prophetic reference to Christ, the True Man and Saviour of the world. Jesus' great act of delivering the world through His resurrection is foreshadowed as we sing the verses: "Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! Salvation belongs to the Lord, Your blessing is upon Your people!" (Ps. 3:7,8) Though we are cast out of Paradise, God promises that the light of salvation will dawn upon us.

The "Lamp-lighting Psalms" & Poetic Verses

The next major hymn of Vespers again comes from the Book of Psalms. The "Lamp-lighting Psalms" are 140, 141, 129 and 116. Originally, it was during the chanting of these psalms that the lamps were lit in the church. The first two verses of Psalm 140 are sung, while the rest of the psalms are chanted by a reader.

As the final verse of Psalm 141 is chanted we begin interweaving special poetic hymns between the Psalm verses. These are the first variable hymns of the service. The variable hymns of Vespers form the "teaching element" of this service; they reveal the significance of the feast or saint being commemorated that day. As every Sunday celebrates Jesus' resurrection, the variable hymns of Saturday evening have a resurrectional theme.

As the Lamp-lighting Psalms and poetic verses are being chanted, the priest censes the church. Incense is a symbol of the prayers of the faith, as mentioned in Psalm 140, verse 2: "let my prayer arise in Your sight as incense, and the

lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice." The lighting of the Temple lamps and the offering of incense was an obligation instituted by God in the Old Testament (Ex. 27:21, 30:8), which was continued in the Apostolic Church. The service of vespers is the continuation of this liturgical commandment of God.

The Entrance & "O Gladsome Light"

At the conclusion of the Lamp-lighting Psalms, the Royal Doors are opened and an entrance is made, usually with the censer* During this entrance, we sing the ancient evening hymn, "O Gladsome Light" — a hymn of praise to Christ, the Light of the World. With the singing of this hymn, we see the first ray of hope for the world, as the Light of Jesus' Divinity begins to shine in the darkness of the fallen world.

The Evening Prokeimen & Readings

Following the Entrance is the Evening Prokeimen, a psalm verse with refrain. At one time, readings from the Old Testament were chanted at every Vespers - the prokeimen was the preamble to these readings. Now Old Testament readings are prescribed only on selected holy days. These readings, called "Parameias", reveal the Old Testament prophecy about the celebration of the day.

The Evening Prayer

After another series of petitions calling upon God to shed His mercy upon us, we recite the evening prayer of Vespers: "Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this evening without sin..." Following this prayer is a

* At Vespers where there is a Gospel reading, the Gospel book is brought out instead.

litany in which we pray for God's protection throughout our lives, to our final breath.

The Litia

On major feast days a special service, called the "Litia" is added here. It consists of a procession to the rear of the Church for a special litany of supplication on behalf of the Church and Civil Authorities, and all those in need of God's help; following these prayers, the clergy process to the front of the church for a blessing of bread, wheat, wine, and oil. The faithful will partake of the bread and wine, and be blessed with the oil, at the end of the service.

The Aposticha

The second series of "teaching hymns" again are interwoven between the chanting of Psalm verses.

The Song of St. Simeon

The final major hymn of Vespers, the Song of St. Simeon, comes from the New Testament. Simeon was the righteous Jewish elder whom God promised would not die until he had seen the Messiah. On the fortieth day after Jesus' birth, Joseph takes Mary and the Christ-Child to the temple for His dedication ceremony. As Simeon takes Jesus in his arms, he realized that this Child is God's promised Saviour. He then sings these words which have echoed down to us throughout history: "Now let Your servant depart in peace, O Master, for my eyes have seen Your

salvation..." Simeon called the Child "a Light to enlighten the Gentiles, and the glory of God's people, Israel." The world, cast into the darkness of sin so long ago, is illumined by the coming of Christ the Light of the world.

The Troparia

Just before the dismissal and benediction, the faithful sing the third variable hymn of the service. The "tropar" is an anthem of a particular Feast or Saint. On Saturday evenings, one of the eight resurrectional tropars is sung (each with its own melody or "tone"), followed by a Theotokion, or anthem to the Mother of God.

The Evening Prayer

Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this evening without sin. Blessed are You, O Lord God of our fathers, and praised and glorified be Your name forever. Amen. Let Your mercy, O Lord, be upon us, as we have set our hope on You. Blessed are You, O Lord, teach me Your statutes! Blessed are You, O Master, make me to understand Your commandments! Blessed are You, O Holy One, enlighten me with Your precepts! Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever; O despise not the works of Your hands! To You belongs worship, to You belongs praise, to You belongs glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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Evening Worship of the Orthodox Church



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Your sight as incense."*

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