

Praying the “Jesus Prayer”

The Jesus Prayer--“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The *Jesus Prayer* is a short formulaic prayer esteemed and advocated within the Eastern Orthodox Church: Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, γιὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐλέησόν με ἁμαρτωλόν. It is often repeated continually as a part of personal ascetic practice. Its use is an integral part of the eremitic tradition of prayer known as *Hesychasm*.¹ The prayer is particularly esteemed by the spiritual masters between the fourth and fifteenth centuries of the Eastern Orthodox hesychast tradition and compiled as the *Philokalia* in the eighteenth century by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth.² The *Jesus Prayer* is part of the contemplative tradition and it teaches understanding of the inner or mystical Kingdom of God within each person. The Holy Spirit kindles a perpetual fire that burns in the heart, in a love for all things, which is to share in the energy of God, which is love. (Leviticus 9:24) It is within the *Philokalia* that the individual learns how to properly navigate the passions and depravity of existence called the world. Hence, praying the *Jesus Prayer* becomes a prayer of the heart (called *Hesychasm*) and emerges as love and as the source of all this it truly beautiful and resplendent with divine glory.³ The Eastern Orthodox theology of the *Jesus Prayer* enunciated in the fourteenth century by St. Gregory Palamas has never been fully accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. However, in the *Jesus Prayer* there can be seen the Eastern counterpart of the Roman Catholic Rosary, which has developed to hold a similar place in the Christian West.⁴ The origin of the *Jesus Prayer* is most likely the Egyptian desert, which was settled by the monastic Desert Fathers in the fifth century. Antoine Guillaumont reports the finding of an inscription containing the *Jesus Prayer* in the ruins of a cell in the Egyptian desert dated roughly to this period.⁵

The *Jesus Prayer* is a prayer to pray unceasingly.⁶ The theological roots of the *Jesus Prayer* is considered to be the response of the Holy Tradition to the lesson taught by the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, in which the Pharisee demonstrates the improper way to pray by exclaiming: “Thank you Lord that I am not like the Publican,” whereas the Publican prays correctly in humility, saying “Lord have mercy on me a sinner.”⁷ (Luke 18:10-14)

Philippians 2:10-11 (KJV)—“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” The early church came to understand that the very name of Jesus had great power and that the recitation of His Name was itself a form of prayer.

The *Jesus Prayer* is a combination of that early Christian practice and the prayer offered by the publican in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. (Luke 18:9-14) It is most likely the most popular prayer among Eastern Christians, both Orthodox and Catholic, who recite it using prayer ropes that are similar to Western rosaries. A prayer rope (Russian: *chotki*; Greek: *komovoskini*) is a cord, usually woolen, tied with many knots. The person saying the prayer says one repetition for each knot. It may be accompanied by prostrations and the sign of the cross,

¹ Greek ἡσυχάζω, *hesychazo*, “to keep stillness.”

² George S. Bebis, Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, *Handbook of spiritual counsel*, trans. by Peter A. Chamberas (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 17-52; cf. Constantine Cavamos, *St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite* (Belmont MA: The Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1974), pp. 96-114. The term *Philokalia*, *φιλοκαλία*, means the “love of the good.”

³ John Breck, *Scripture in tradition: The Bible and its interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Yonkers NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Angelus Message*, 11 August 1996. “Eastern theology has enriched the whole church.” Retrieved on: <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=5660&CFID=96365385&CFTOKEN=17133328> (Accessed on: 11 September 2011).

⁵ Antoine Guillaumont, Une inscription copte sur la prière de Jesus in Aux origins du monachisme chrétien, Pour une phenomenology du monachisme, *Spiritualité orientale et vie monastique*, 30 (Bégrolles en Mauges (Maine & Loire), France: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, n.d.), pp. 168-183.

⁶ Scott P. Richart, The *Jesus Prayer*: A prayer to pray unceasingly, *About.com*. Retrieved on: http://catholicism.about.com/od/prayers/qt/Jesus_Prayer.htm (Access on 11 September 2011).

⁷ Steven Peter Tschlis, The *Jesus Prayer*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Retrieved on: <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7104.asp> (Accessed on 2 March 2008).

signaled by beads strung along the prayer rope at intervals. The prayer rope is “a tool of prayer.” The use of the rope is not compulsory; it is considered an aid to the beginners or the “weak” practitioners, those who face difficulties practicing the *Jesus Prayer*. Ideally, the *Jesus Prayer* is practiced under the guidance and supervision of a spiritual guide or spiritual director.⁸ This practice of the *Jesus Prayer* is integrated into the mental *asceticism* in the monastic pursuit of a lifestyle to encourage or “prepare the ground” for mind-body transformation. However, the *Jesus Prayer* is not limited only to monastic life or to clergy. All members of Christ’s Church are advised to practice this prayer.

In order to “rejoice evermore,” the Apostle Paul urges Christians to “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-17) Psalm 39:7-11⁹ is an interesting text in this light. It is customary to begin a distinct turning-point of a discourse with וְעַתָּה, “and now,” *i.e.*, in connection with this nothingness of vanity of a life which is so full of suffering and unrest, what am I to hope, *quid sperem* ? (cf. Psalm 11:3) The answer to this question which the psalmist himself presents is that Yahweh is the goal of his waiting or hoping. It might appear strange that the psalmist is willing to make the brevity of human life a reason for being calm as well as a basis of comfort. The explanation for this is presented by the psalmist. Although he is not expressly assured of a future life of blessedness, his faith, even in the midst of death, lays hold on Yahweh as the Living One and as the God of the living. This is an expression of the heroic exhibited in the Older Testament. In the midst of the riddles of the present and in the face of the future which is lost in the dismal night, the psalmist casts himself unreservedly into the arms of God. While sin is the root of all evil, the psalmist prays in Psalm 39:9 before all else, that God would remove from him all the transgressions by which he has fully incurred his affliction and that given over to the consequences of his sin, these transgressions will be not only to his own dishonor but also to the dishonor of God, and will become a derision to the unbelieving. Hence, he prays in Psalm 39:9 that God would not permit it to come to this.¹⁰ As to the rest, the psalmist is silent and calm; because God is the author of his affliction.¹¹ The psalmist here continues to point intently to the prosperity of the ungodly. The psalmist recognizes the hand of God in his affliction, and knows that he has not merited anything better. Yet the psalmist is permitted to pray that God would grant mercy to take the place of right. To strike a blow, נִגְעָה, is the name the psalmist gives to his affliction. As in Psalm 38:12, it is to being a stroke or blow of divine wrath, יָדָךְ תִּגְרָת, as a quarrel into which God’s hand has fallen with him, and by אֱלֹהֵי, with the almighty (punishing) hand of God. The psalmist prays that God will remove the stroke or blow away from him and that he is consumed by the blow of God’s hand. The psalmist contrasts himself as the feeble one, to whom, if the present state of things continues, ruin is certain. In Psalm 39:12, the psalmist puts his own personal experience into the form of a general maxim.¹² The thought expressed in Psalm 39:6 is here repeated as a refrain.¹³

The *Jesus Prayer* is one of the best ways to start praying without ceasing. It is easy to memorize. It can be employed at any momentary gap in other any person’s active day. It focuses one’s attention on the Holy Name of Jesus and focuses one’s thoughts on Him and growing in His grace. There are not fixed, invariable rules for those who pray the *Jesus Prayer*. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says, “There is no mechanical, physical or mental technique which can force God to show His presence.”¹⁴ People who say this prayer as part of meditation often synchronize it with their breathing: breathing in while calling out to God (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God”) and breathing out while prayer for mercy (“have mercy on me, a sinner”). Another option is to say, orally or mentally, the

⁸Cf. C. J. deCatanaro, S. J. Maloney, & George, *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 7-8.

⁹This Psalm 39:8-12 in the Hebrew text.

¹⁰כָּל, in Psalm 39:9, has *Mercha*, and, as in Psalm 35:10, is consequently to be read with *â* (not *ô*), since an accent can never be placed by *Kametz chatûph*. (Concerning כָּל, Psalm 39:9, see on Psalm 14:1.

¹¹עֲשָׂה, used just as absolutely as in Psalm 22:32; Psalm 37:5; 52:11; and Lamentations 1:21.

¹²*When with rebukes* (תּוֹכַחֲוֹת from תּוֹכַחַת, collateral form with תּוֹכַחַת) *Thou chastenest a man on account of iniquity* (perf. *conditionale*), *Thou makest his pleasantness* (Isaiah 53:3), *i.e.*, his bodily beauty (Job 33:21), *to melt away*, moulder away (וַתִּמָּט, fut. apoc. from הִמָּסָה to cause to melt, Psalm 6:7), *like the moth* (Hosea 5:12), *so that it falls away, as a moth-eaten garment falls into rags. Thus do all men become mere nothing. They are sinful and perishing.*

¹³C. F. Keil & Delitzsch, *Psalms, Commentary on the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), Vol. 5.

¹⁴Kallistos Ware, *The power of the Name: The Jesus Prayer in Orthodox Spirituality*, Fairacres Publications, No. 43 (Oxford: Fairacres Publications, 1986), pp. 23 & 26.

whole prayer while breathing in and again the whole prayer while breathing out and yet another, to breathe in recite the whole prayer, breathe out while reciting the whole prayer again. One can also hold the breath for a few seconds between breathing in and out. It is advised, in any of these three last cases, that this be done under some kind of spiritual guidance and supervision.

In praying this prayer, the individual puts himself or herself face to face with the Lordship and with the Person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the historicity and in the divinity of Christ. As such, the individual puts himself and herself face to face with Him and in the right state of mind: "Have mercy on me, a sinner."¹⁵ When the words "have mercy" are used in all of the Christians Churches and in Orthodoxy, they are the response of the people to all the petitions suggested by the priest. The Greek word which is found in the Gospels and in the early liturgies is *eleison*. *Eleison* is from the same root as *elaion*, which means olive tree and the oil from it. In the Older and New Testaments, one finds this described in a variety of parables and events which allow the reader to form a complete idea of the meaning of the word. The image of the olive tree is in Genesis, *e.g.*, after the flood Noah sends birds, one after the other, to find out whether there is any dry land or not, and one of them, a dove, brings back a small twig of olive. This twig conveys to Noah and to all with him in the ark the news that the wrath of God has ceased, that God is not offering humans a fresh opportunity. All those who are in the ark will be able to settle again on firm ground and make an attempt to live, and never more perhaps, if they can help it, undergo the wrath of God.¹⁶ Olive oil is poured to soothe and to heal. It is use to anoint kings and priests in the Older Testament and today in the ordinations of deacons, priests, and bishops. The oil speaks first of all about the end of the wrath of God, of the peace which God offers to the people who have offended against Him. It speaks further about the healing that God brings to humans. God pours His grace abundantly on the believer. (Romans 5:20) God gives the individual power to do what he or she could not otherwise do. *Eleison*, "have mercy on us," is not just asking God to save us from His wrath; we are asking for His love.

In the *Jesus Prayer*, the words "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" help us discover that the first words express with exactness and integrity the gospel faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the historical incarnation of the Word of God. The end of the prayer expresses all the complex rich relationships of love that exist between God and his creatures.

This is a very companionable prayer. It is a friendly prayer. It is always at hand and very individual in spite of its monotonous repetitions. It is a response to any call of God whether in joy or in sorrow. When this prayer has become habitual, it becomes a quickening of the soul and a response to any call of God. The words of St. Symeon, the New Theologian, apply to all of its possible effects on us: "Do not worry about what will come next, you will discover it when it comes."¹⁷

On this day of the *Exaltation of the Holy Cross*, which is also the anniversary of my consecration to the episcopacy, I extend to the parishes and missions and to the clergy of the United Anglican Church, my prayers and thanksgiving for the wonderful blessings we have by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As I begin my twelfth year of my episcopal ministry during my forty-seventh year of ordained ministry, it is fitting to remember the gift that we have through the Holy Cross: "We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee, for by thy cross thou hast redeemed the world."
✠ Archbishop Robert Parlotz, THFP

A benediction of Saint Francis: "Now, wherever we are, and in every place, and at every hour, throughout each time of each day, may all of us honestly and humbly believe, holding in our hearts, to love, honor, adore, serve, praise, bless, glorify, exalt, magnify, and give thanks to the Most High and Eternal God, Trinity and Unity. Amen."

¹⁵ Anthony Bloom, *The Jesus Prayer*, Living Prayer (Springfield IL: Tempiegate Publishers, 1966), pp. 84-88.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 AD) was a Byzantine Christian monk and poet who was the last of three saints canonized by the eastern Orthodox church and given the title of "Theologian" along with John the Apostle and Gregory of Nazianzus. The title "theologian" is not used in the modern academic sense of theological study, but to recognize someone who spoke from personal experience of the vision of God. One of the principle teachings of St. Symeon the New Theologian was that humans could and should experience *theoria* (literally, "contemplation," or direct experience of God).