



GREAT VESPERS

The Orthodox Church invites her faithful children to make a journey with her, passing through salvation history in order to enter into communion with God's love and by retracing the long way already trodden, to live again the sacred events of our salvation.

In the Orthodox Church, the liturgical day begins in the evening with the setting of the sun. This practice follows the biblical account of creation: *And there was evening and there was morning, one day* (Gen 1:5).

Great Vespers, the first service of worship for "a new day," leads us through the Old Testament to the New.

THE PSALM

After the opening exclamation, portions of Psalm 104/103 are sung, signifying that at the Creation, the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters (Gen 1). The Holy Doors of the iconostasis are opened, showing that from the creation of the world, man was appointed to dwell in Paradise. This blessed condition, however, was of short duration, and the closing of the doors at the conclusion of the psalm symbolizes the expulsion of man from Paradise.

The priest or deacon then stands before the Holy Doors representing Adam sorrowing, in penitence and humility, before the closed gates of Paradise. The Great Litany, sometimes called the Litany of

Peace, expresses this condition in which we are called to pray to Almighty God for everyone and everything.

The Psalms have been called the "Prayerbook of the Church." Following the Litany, one of the twenty divisions of The Book of Psalms is sung. On Saturday evenings, we sing from the first division: "Blessed is the man..." among which is the verse: "Arise, O Lord, Save me, O my God." Since each Sunday is a remembrance of our Lord's Resurrection, this selection already begins to bring it into focus.

LORD I CALL

Following a short litany, verses from Psalm 141/140 are sung according to a specially designated "tone", which changes from week to week. During this time, another censuring is made of the entire church by the celebrant. This expresses Adam's repentance for his sin as well as his longing for the Paradise that he had lost. It is also his exhortation to his posterity that they should utterly obey the will of God. The censuring at this point is an expression of our desire that our prayers, through the mediation of Christ, may ascend to heaven and that the belief that the Holy Spirit is always present in the Church. To the prophetic verses from Psalm 141/140 are added special hymns that expand on the particular theme of the day—the Resurrection, feast, or saint's day. At their conclusion a hymn called the "Dogmatic" is sung. In addition to its praise of the Virgin Mary, it contains certain dogmatic teachings concerning the person of Jesus Christ. It is during this hymn that the Holy Doors are

opened and an entrance is made by the celebrants. The opened doors now symbolize that with the coming of the Lord, the gates of Paradise have been opened.

O GLADSOME LIGHT

This ancient hymn extols Christ as the first ray of the New Testament Light. It reminds us that the light of the sun—the created light—is inadequate when compared to the Divine, Uncreated Light, which is Christ. From this point in the service, Vespers becomes more and more oriented towards the Savior and salvation. Through Christ, the captivity of the soul has come to an end—the darkness is dispersed by the Light of Christ.

PROKEIMENON

Following the "O Gladsome Light" verses from the Psalms are sung. This part of Vespers is called Prokeimenon, which means "to introduce." Generally, the Prokeimenon merely serves to draw attention to a theme. On occasion readings from the Old Testament are introduced here.

LITANIES

A Litany of Supplication (characterized by the threefold “Lord, have mercy”) is chanted. Following the Prayer of Vespers, “Vouchsafe,” another Litany of Vespers is chanted, in which we specify which mercies we desire.

ADDITIONAL VERSES

More verses, which concentrate on the day’s theme or special commemoration, follow and are joined together with psalm verses corresponding to the person or event being commemorated. Vespers is the learning service of the Church, which instructs the faithful in the meaning of what is being celebrated as well as in the correct interpretation of various psalms and scriptural verses and their proper context. All of this learning will climax in the participation in the Holy Eucharist at the Divine Liturgy.

PRAYER OF ST. SIMEON

At this point in Vespers, having come to an understanding of the lessons the Church has taught us through the service, the dismissal prayer of St. Simeon follows (Lk 2:29-32). We have traveled the long road and seen at last the dawn of new life. Only then, echoing this scriptural prayer, has our soul acquired the right to depart—“For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.”

CONCLUSION

The Trisagion, or Thrice-Holy Prayers, concluding with “Our Father,” are followed by the singing of the Troparion, which is a themed hymn based on the commemorations of the day. Finally, the “Dialogue of Dismissal” is chanted, permitting us to depart.

Great Vespers is thus filled with memories of the creation, fall, expulsion from Paradise, and anticipation of the coming of the Savior Who brings light to the world. On Saturday evenings it is our worthy preparation for the Lord’s Day that will follow, enabling us to participate fully in the Mystery of God’s Love through Holy Communion.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION,
PLEASE CONTACT:**

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