



Midnight Prayer

*"At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You,
Because of Your righteous judgments." Psalm 119:62*

Activity

Split the class into two groups and ask them to do the following:

Imagine that they are on a panel of bishops in early church times, and they have to decide what goes into the midnight prayer.

What would you choose? How would you structure it?

What would you include? What would you want it to symbolize?

Revision of the hours of prayer in the Agbia

The *Agpeya* is primarily used by the Coptic Orthodox Church. It contains prayers for seven different hours to be said throughout the day. The hours are chronologically laid out, each containing a theme corresponding to events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Each hour is composed of an introduction which includes the Lord's Prayer, the Prayer of Thanksgiving, and Psalm 50. It is followed by various Psalms, an excerpt from the Holy Gospel, and Litanies. Lord Have Mercy is then chanted 41 times (representing the 39 lashes Christ received before the crucifixion, plus one for the spear in His side, plus one for the crown of thorns), followed by several other prayers and a conclusion.

In every hour the church offers us the memory of a certain phase of God's redeeming work.

- ❖ The First Hour (6am) reminds us of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and our daily resurrection to begin a new life in Him.
- ❖ The Prayer of the Third Hour (9am) reminds us of the coming upon the church of the Holy Spirit of God, the Giver of perpetual renewal and holiness.
- ❖ In the Sixth Hour (12 midday) we remember the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ In the Ninth Hour (3pm) we remember the death in the flesh of our Lord and the acceptance of the right hand thief, in Paradise.
- ❖ In the Vespers or Eleventh Hour (sunset – 5pm) we remember the removing of our Lord's Body from the cross, giving thanks for concluding the day, and asking Him that we might spend the night in peace.
- ❖ In the prayer before sleeping (6pm) we remember the burial of the Body of our Lord watching for the end of our sojourn on earth.
- ❖ In the three midnight prayers we await for the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ❖ The Veil prayer is prayed only by the Monks.

Introduction to the midnight prayer

The Midnight Prayer commemorates the second coming of our Lord. It consists of three services which correspond to the three stages of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane during Holy Week (Matthew 25:1-13).

Originally, monks would rise in the middle of the night to sing praises to God. Saint Symeon the New Theologian mentions Psalm 118, a significant component of the Midnight Prayer on weekdays, being said privately in the cells before the Morning Prayer.

Concerning the Midnight Prayer, Saint Mark of Ephesus says: "The beginning of all the hymns and prayers to God is the time of the midnight prayer. For, rising from sleep for it, we signify the transportation from the life of the deceit of darkness to the life which is, according to Christ, free and bright, with which we begin to worship God. For it is written, *The people who sat in darkness saw a great light*" (Isaiah 9:2 and Matthew 4:16)

Structure of the Midnight prayer

First Service:

Psalm 134

3 psalms from the first hour (Psalms 3, 6, 13 (12))

3 psalms from the sixth hour (Psalms 70 (69), 86 (85), 91 (90))

2 psalms from the eleventh hour (Psalms 117 (116), 118 (117))

Psalm 119 (118)

This psalm is prayed in its entirety during the first service of the midnight prayer.

Psalm 119 (118) is the longest of all the psalms and the longest chapter in the Holy Bible. Its headings are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The key to understanding it is verses 1 & 2 as they explain who the blessed people are. These people are those who are blameless; walk in the law of the Lord; search out His testimonies; and who search for Him with their whole heart. It describes a dynamic spiritual life and sets the stage for progressing through all the truths revealed in verses 3 – 176, i.e. that with God's help and by continual repentance, a blameless walk with Him is possible. This blameless walk is the way for one to prepare for the day of his death. Christ Himself lived and died this way, and through Him, we who believe are to live and die in this way also.

This psalm's main theme is that God's word is true and wonderful. Hiding (keeping) God's Word in our hearts is a deterrent to sin. This alone should inspire us to memorise the word of God. Memorising God's word alone will not keep us from sin; we must also put God Word to work in our lives, making it a vital guide to everything we do. Stay true to God and His word no matter how bad the world becomes. Obedience to God's laws is the only way to achieve real happiness.

Gospel – Matthew 25:1-13 Parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins

In Jewish tradition on the wedding day, the bridegroom went to the bride's house for the ceremony, then the bride and groom along with a great procession, returned to the groom's house where a feast took place, often lasting a full week. These ten virgins were waiting to join the procession, and they hoped to take part in the wedding banquet. But when the groom didn't come at the expected time, five of them ran out of lamp oil. By the time they had purchased extra oil, it was too late to join the feast.

When Jesus returns to take His people to heaven, we must be ready. Spiritual preparation cannot be bought or borrowed at the last minute. Our relationship with God must be our own.

The kingdom of heaven is often portrayed as a marriage between Christ and His Church. The marriage will be consummated at the end of the age when the Bridegroom returns to escort His Bride, the Church, into the eternal wedding banquet.

Second Service:

All the psalms of the eleventh hour (sunset prayer) are read except Psalms 117 & 118.

Gospel – Luke 7:36-50 The sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet

Although the woman was not an invited guest, she entered the house anyway and knelt behind Jesus at His feet. In Jesus' day it was customary to recline while eating. Dinner guests would lie on couches with their heads near the table, propping themselves up on one elbow and stretching their feet out behind them. The woman could easily anoint Jesus' feet without approaching the table. Here, St Luke contrasts two different people, Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman.

Simon had committed several social errors by not washing Jesus' feet (a normal courtesy to guests because sandaled feet got very dirty), anointing Jesus' head with oil or offering Him the kiss of greeting. The sinful woman by contrast, lavished tears, expensive perfume and kisses on her Saviour. In this situation, it is the grateful prostitute, not the stingy religious leader, whose sins were forgiven.

This woman's actions demonstrated her true faith and Jesus honoured her faith by forgiving her. Overflowing love is the natural response to forgiveness and the appropriate consequence of faith. But only those who realise the depth of their sin can appreciate the complete forgiveness God offers them. Jesus has rescued all His followers, whether they were extremely wicked or conventionally good, from eternal death. Here, the Church reminds us that we need to be ready for His second coming by living a life of repentance and experiencing the wideness of His mercy.

Third Service:

All the psalms of the twelfth hour (prayer before sleep) are read.

Gospel – Luke 12:32-46 Jesus warns about preparing for His coming

This warning from Jesus echoes the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins – Our Lord Christ's return at an unexpected time is not a trap, or a trick by which God hopes to catch us off guard. In fact, God is delaying His return so more people will have the opportunity to follow Him (see 2 Peter 3:9). Before Christ's return we have time to live out our beliefs and to reflect Jesus love as we relate to others.

People who are ready for the Lord's return are:

- (1) not hypocritical, but sincere
- (2) not fearful, but ready to witness
- (3) not worried, but trusting
- (4) not greedy, but generous
- (5) not lazy, but diligent

Conclusion of the third service Luke 2:29-32 Simeon's Song

Simeon saw the fulfilment of the prophesy that salvation would come to the world, and was therefore ready to depart in peace. For the Christian, death is no longer a frightening experience, but a gateway to everlasting peace and spending eternity with Him.

In its wisdom, the church has given us these beautiful parts of the bible to remind us that this world is temporary.

May our lives be more like Christ's, so that when he comes we will be ready to greet Him joyfully.

Practical tips on praying the midnight prayer

- ❖ Begin by consulting with your confession father first as to how much of it and how often you should pray it.
- ❖ Have your own prayer book of the Agpia next to your bed and note down on the margin your own contemplation or interpretations that help you understand and meditate.
- ❖ Even if you have memorized the prayers by heart, look at the pages and use all your senses while saying them so that you are not distracted.
- ❖ Say your prayers aloud to prevent your mind from wandering. Do not say them quickly, otherwise you could miss the pleasure and spirituality of prayer and do not mumble the words.
- ❖ Reciting the psalms to music or chanting them is important as this provides comfort and consolation.
- ❖ Read some interpretations and studies related to the psalms and gospels to help clarify ambiguous verses.
- ❖ Lift up your eyes, heart, thoughts, your hands, and your whole being towards heaven. This will allow you to live some moments in heaven while you are still on earth, and conquer through perseverance all the army of the evil one as well as their wicked head.
- ❖ Repeat the sweet name of Our Lord Jesus Christ during prayer, every time you say "God", follow up by "Jesus Christ".
- ❖ It would be convenient to make the sign of the Cross and kneel down to the floor every time you give glory to God.