

5.

**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies (...in the presence of those that afflict me...): thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over (...thy cup which inebriates me, how excellent it is).**

“What does David mean by this (“Thou hast prepared a table...”) if not the mystical and spiritual table which God has prepared for us?...He anointed thy head on the forehead with the seal of God, which thou didst receive so that thou mightest bear the seal impressed as the sign of consecration to God. And you see that David is speaking of the chalice, over which Christ said after giving thanks, ‘This is the chalice of my blood’” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem). “Having abandoned the remains of the former error and renewed his youth like that of an eagle, the newly baptized hurriedly approaches the celestial banquet. He arrives, and seeing the altar prepared, he exclaims, ‘Thou hast prepared a table before me...’” (St. Ambrose). “In these lines the Word clearly designates the sacramental unction (chrism) and the holy sacrifice of Christ’s table” (Eusebius of Caesarea). “The Holy Spirit expresses in the Psalms the same figure of the Eucharist when the Lord’s chalice is mentioned; ‘Thy cup which inebriates me, how excellent it is!’ But the inebriation which the Lord’s chalice gives is not similar to that of profane wine. It intoxicates in such a way that it does not make one lose his reason; it leads souls to spiritual wisdom...” (St. Cyprian of Carthage). “Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine. But Peter...said unto them...these are not drunken, as ye suppose...but this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: and it shall come to pass in the last day, saith God,

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:13-17).

6.

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life (...mercy shall pursue me...); and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

“Christ, providing the soul with the wine ‘that maketh glad the heart of men,’ provokes in it that sober intoxication which elevates the dispositions of the heart from transitory to eternal things...He who has tasted, in fact, this inebriation trades the ephemeral for that which has no end and remains in the house of the Lord all the days of his life” (St. Gregory of Nyssa).

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(By Archbishop Dmitri, originally published in the May 1986 issue of The Dawn. The Dawn is a Publication of the Diocese of the South, Orthodox Church in America)

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### Orthodox Church of the Mother of God

Mays Landing, NJ  
Hudson St & Ivan's Lane,  
Mays Landing NJ 08330

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## The Lord is my Shepherd

Psalm 22/23 which begins with the words, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” is probably one of the best known, most often quoted and memorized of all David’s beautiful hymns. It has always occupied an important place in the spiritual life of the Orthodox Christian, and is one of the Psalms included in the order of preparation for the reception of Holy Communion.

In the early Church the catechumens, especially as the time for their baptism drew near, were made familiar with its contents and were even obliged to learn it by heart. It seems, however, that its meaning was not fully explained to them until after they had received the grace of the All-holy Spirit in the mysteries of baptism, chrismation and the eucharist.

**“We gave you the Psalm, beloved children who hurriedly approach the baptism of Christ, so that you might learn it by heart. But, it is necessary, because of its mystical, hidden meaning, that we explain it to you, with the light of divine grace.”** (From a sermon attributed to St. Augustine.)

The Fathers of the Church saw in Psalm 22 both a prophecy and a summary of the mysteries (sacraments) of Christian initiation: “By this Psalm, Christ teaches the Church that, first of all, you must become a sheep of the Good Shepherd: the catechetical instruction guides you to the pastures and fountains of doctrine. Then you must be buried with Him into death by baptism. But this is not death, but a shadow and image of death. Then He prepares the mystical table. Then He anoints you with the oil of the Spirit. And finally He presents the wine that gladdens the heart of man and produces that sober inebriation characteristic of the true Christian” (St. Gregory of Nyssa).

It is to be noted that then, as now, our Orthodox Church used the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint – it is Psalm 22 in the Greek), and the understanding of its mystical meaning was based on this version. The traditional meaning given the Psalm in our Church is obscured in a few phrases of the most widely known English translations, since they follow the Hebrew rather than the Greek. In the following selection of commentaries on the six verses, **we give first the King James translation** and in the parentheses a more or less literal translation of the Septuagint.

**1.**

**The Lord is my Shepherd (The Lord shepherds me); I shall not want (I shall lack nothing).**

“David invites you to be one of the sheep whose Shepherd is Christ and who lack no good thing. The Good Shepherd makes Himself everything for you: pasture, water of rest, food, dwelling place, and the way of righteousness, and He gives you the Comforter, distributing His grace according to your needs” (*St. Gregory of Nyssa*). Those who belong to Christ “have as their guide not a simple holy man, as Israel had Moses, but the Prince of Shepherds and the Teacher of doctrine, in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*St. Cyril of Alexandria*). “He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that are young...they shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them...” (*Isaiah 40:11; 49:10*).

**2.**

**He maketh me to lie down in green pastures (He has made me to dwell in a place of verdure): He leadeth me beside the still waters (He has nourished me beside the waters of rest).**

“The place of verdure (green pastures) means the ever-fresh words of Holy Scripture, which nourishes the hearts of believers and gives them spiritual strength” (*St. Cyril of Alexandria*). “The waters of rest means, no doubt, holy baptism, by which the weight of sin is removed.” After having fed the person who comes to Him in faith with His word, the Lord leads him to the waters of baptism, making him a sheep of His holy flock, whose destiny is only to enter into God’s rest. “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God...Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest...” (*Hebrews 4:9,11*). (“Rest” in both Hebrews 4 and our Psalm is “anapausis” in Greek.)

**3.**

**He restoreth my soul (He has converted my soul): He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake (He has led me...).**

David speaks of his own experience: after having learned of God’s ways he strayed from the paths of righteousness and fell into deadly sin. His experience in this Psalm becomes a prophecy: anyone, no matter how far he may have strayed from God, in Christ may be converted and return to the way of righteousness and learn to do God’s will.

**4.**

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil (...though I walk in the midst of the shadow of death...): for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me (...they have comforted me).**

“It is necessary for you to be buried in death with Him by baptism. But it is not really death, but a shadow and image of death” (*St. Gregory of Nyssa*). “For we are baptized into the death of Christ, baptism is called the shadow and image of death, in face of which there is no longer anything to fear” (*St. Cyril of Alexandria*). The last part of this verse refers to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. “He comforts the believer, or guides him, with the rod and staff (the Shepherd’s crook) of the Spirit, for the One who guides or comforts is the Spirit (the Paraclete – the Greek verb here is “parekalesan”)” (*St. Gregory of Nyssa*). “And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever...when He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth...” (*John 14:16; 16:13*) (– the verb translated “He has led...” in v. 3 of the Psalm, and “will guide” in John is “hodigise” and “hodigisei” in Greek).