



Mahragan
Alkeraza
2019

ARISE & BUILD

Nehemiah 2:20



“Therefore we His servants will arise and build.”

Nehemiah 2:20

Gr. 9-12

English Edition



H.H. Pope Tawadros II

Pope of Alexandria &
Patriarch of the See of St. Mark



H.G. Bishop Mina

Bishop of Mississauga,
Vancouver and Western Canada



INTRODUCTION

Mahragan Alkeraza 2019

As we celebrated the conclusion of last year's Mahragan with the distribution of the trophies for the first, second and third place winners, we were grateful for God's blessings for a successful 2018 Mahragan. His Holiness Pope Tawadros II said during the Awards Ceremony in Egypt, "I am happy to see the activities of the Youth Bishopric, I am glad that our beautiful Church that is 2000 years old is full of young youth and I am proud to see the creative work and achievements of the youth."

Last year, in addition to the usual participation from Egypt and Sudan, we had a great worldwide participation from 192 Churches representing more than 20 countries and 8 languages.

The theme for Mahragan 2019 is "Therefore we His servants will arise and build." (Nehemiah 2:20). This year, God is asking each one of us to grow in Christ. To do this we will learn about the following topics:

1. Arise & Build!
2. The Book Of Ezra Part 1
3. The Book Of Ezra Part 2
4. The Spiritual Struggle And God's Grace



5. The Evolution Of The Church Of God
6. Personality Development

We hope that all of you will participate in the Mahragan activities this year, and encourage everyone you know to join us in one of the greatest annual events, presented by our mother, the Coptic Orthodox Church.

May God bless Mahragan Alkeraza this year and the efforts of all the participants and coordinators, through the prayers of our beloved father Pope Tawadros II.

✠
My best wishes for a happy
Festival

✠
Bishop Moussa

Arise & Build



1. To Arise:

- **To arise refers to repentance:**

- ❖ Ephesians 5:14

“¹⁴ Awake, you who sleep,
Arise from the dead,
And Christ will give you light.”

- **Death is the death of sin:**

- *Romans 6:23*

“²³ For the wages of sin *is* death,”

Reflection:

- Death is the punishment and the natural result of sin because sin:
 - Destroys the body
 - Kills spirituality
 - Causes the sinner to lose eternal life
- Repentance is necessary; this is what is meant by “rise up”.
- Repentance is the spiritual awakening in which we rise up from the death of sin to a new spiritual life that qualifies us to an eternal life in the kingdom of God.

The Concept of Repentance and Confession in the Church:

- **Repentance Should Be Wholeheartedly:**
The repentant feels that he/she was living in separation from God. The repentant is in a kind of spiritual death and is in continuous self-destruction.

- **Determination to Leave the Sinful Life:**
Words without actions are meaningless.
Without determination to leave sin behind, there is no true repentance. The constant fight against any temptation or pressure shows in the struggle to be liberated from the sinful life. It shows the honest intention in repentance and to live a holy life.
 - *Proverbs 28:13*
“¹³ He who covers his sins will not prosper,
But whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy.”

- **Confession to the Priest:**
This is to fulfill the words of our Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples, where he gave them to authority to bind and to loose.
 - *Matthew 18:18*
“¹⁸ “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The repentant can then partake in the Holy Communion.

As Pope Shenouda III taught us, in confession the repentant receives both an absolution and a solution:

- An absolution from the sins; and
- A solution to any spiritual problems that prevent our spiritual growth.

How Repentance Should Be:

1. Quick:

- It is dangerous to delay repentance

❖ *Romans 13:11*

“*11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.*”

2. Determined:

- The bible identifies a hesitant repentant as:

❖ *James 1:8*

“*he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.*”

- It is important for a person to be determined in all what he does:

❖ *Luke 15:17-18*

“*How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’*”

3. Complete:

- For an individual’s repentance to be complete, one needs to submit their life at the foot of the Cross.
- It is dangerous to enjoy the sin, keep accepting it, and not fight against it.
- True repentance must include all aspects of life, and will help you stay on the path of the kingdom of God. One must confess and repent from their sins in:
 - Deeds
 - Words
 - Thoughts
 - Senses

4. Continuous:

- While baptism happens once in a lifetime, repentance is a continuous renewal of the mind and a process that lasts throughout a believer's life.
- This is evident from the washing of Jesus Christ to the disciples' feet without repeating the washing of the body.
 - The concept of confessing and repenting is meant to be a recurring event can be understood by the analogy of how one's feet become dirty as they walk in this life and need to be washed often.
- It is good that the individual evaluate their spiritual life after they fall, and rise again, but it is even better if they learn from their mistakes, flee from evil, and defeat temptation through the grace of God.

5. Fruitful:

- The Bible teaches us that it is not only sufficient to get rid of sins and bad habits but we should also work on developing positive habits and do good deeds.
- The tree of repentance must not be futile as the Lord Jesus asks us for the fruit of the Spirit.
- ❖ *Matthew 3:8*
"8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,"

What Is Required For Our Spiritual Growth?

- Honest repentance and confession in front of God and the priest to obtain the absolution and guidance.
- Regular partaking in the Holy Communion to let Christ to abide in us and us in Him.
- This should be preceded by Baptism and Myron to allow the believer become a member of the body of Christ (the Church).
- Living a pure life under the guidance of the priest and take the blessing of the church sacraments (unction of the sick, matrimony, and priesthood).

2. To Build

- It is not enough to arise, but we should build.
- We live as the light of the world and the salt of the earth bearing fruits with every good deed.
- A Christian must be a well-rounded person as they are the image of God and an ambassador of our Lord Jesus.
- We should build:
 - The body:
As anyone instinctively does, we take care of the body and nourish it.
❖ *Ephesians 5:29*
“²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church.”
 - The soul:
By having one’s soul satisfied with the Lord Jesus, which lets one be freed from the need of food of the world in its corruption and evil.
❖ *Proverbs 27:7*
“⁷ A satisfied soul loathes the honeycomb,
But to a hungry soul every bitter thing *is* sweet.”
 - Note: honeycomb in this context means sin.
 - The mind:
Through one’s presence in the house of the Lord and among the believers, which fill the mind with holy thoughts
❖ *Ephesians 1:18*
“¹⁸ the eyes of your understanding being enlightened;”
 - The spirit:
By having one’s life filled with Christ’s love through prayers, fasting, and partaking in the Holy Sacraments of the church.
 - The relationships:
Through the love of family, the church and the surrounding circles of friends.

The Christian Person Must Be:

1. Physically Sound:

- Be healthy (through nutrition, rest, sport, and personal hygiene),
- With no addictions or dependencies that enslave an individual to sin.
- Respecting our bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.

❖ *1 Corinthians 6:19*

“¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is in you*, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?”

2. Psychologically Enlightened:

- A soul engulfed by sin is always confused, unhappy, and cannot find peace.
- But the soul of the repentant is sanctified by the grace of God and is in control all instincts, needs, habits, and emotions and thus lives in heavenly peace.

❖ *Isaiah 48:22*

“²² “*There is no peace,*” says the Lord, “*for the wicked.*””

3. Mentally Enlightened:

- The church has historically promoted education and the improvement of the mind.
- In fact, Jesus Himself learned. One of the only things we know of His childhood is that He “grew in wisdom” as He grew “in stature”.
- The Lord does not want to take us out of the world but for us to have the wisdom to know what is sinful and stay away from it.

❖ *John 17:14-15*

“¹⁴ I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.”

4. Loving to God's Creation:

- When Jesus was asked which commandment was the greatest, He said,
 - ❖ *Matthew 22:37-39*
“³⁷ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is *the* first and great commandment. ³⁹ And *the* second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
- When you decide to follow Christ, you become an ambassador of Christ. From that point on, the way you act will affect how people see Christ.
- People around us need to see His truth, but they also need desperately to see His love with a living testimony of Christ dwelling in us.
 - ❖ *Matthew 5:16*
“¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”
- Therefore, a Christian who is living in the world but chooses to isolate themselves, hides their light, and decides not to share Christ's love with the world, has effectively broken His second greatest commandment.

3. So Let's Rise and Build:

- Build the wall of Jerusalem: build the walls of discernment to distinguish between good and evil to reach spiritual maturity.
 - ❖ *Hebrews 5:14*
“¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”
- Build the heart of Jerusalem: build the core of your relationship with God through learning and keeping His word.
 - ❖ *Psalms 119:11*
“¹¹ Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.”
- Consecrate the building: as your body was consecrated with the Holy Myron, it became the temple of the Holy Spirit whose fruits are apparent in your works.
 - ❖ *Galatians 5:22-23*
“²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.”
- Invite others to visit: once you've risen and built, invite others to see Him who helped you build to see the light. Serve your family, friends, church, and society.
 - ❖ *Ephesians 5:8*
“⁸ For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in the Lord. Walk as children of light”

The Book of Ezra

Part 1: Chapters 1 – 4

Introduction:

About the Book of Ezra:

- The author of the book is Ezra.
- The book was written in year 538 BC.
- The book was written either in Babylon or in Jerusalem.

About Ezra:

- His name means “help” in Hebrew.
- He is called Ezra the Scribe or Ezra the priest.
- He was born during the captivity.
- Beside the Book of Ezra, Ezra wrote other books in the Bible. He wrote:
 - Psalm 119
 - 1 Chronicles
 - 2 Chronicles
 - 1 Kings
 - 2 Kings
 - the book of Nehemiah

About Israel at that time:

- The people of Israel were allowed to return to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity.
- They returned in three groups:
 - 1st group under the leadership of Zerubbabel
 - 2nd group under the leadership of Ezra
 - 3rd group under the leadership of Nehemiah

Chapter 1:

Characters of Chapter 1:

Name

Characteristics

Cyrus, King of Persia

- He conquered and took over the kingdoms of Media, Persia and Babylon.
- Because of the significance of Persia in the ancient world, he was called the “King of Persia”.
- He was a brave, compassionate and religiously tolerant ruler. He allowed the inhabitants of his kingdom to worship their own god.
- He called the Jews to return to Jerusalem, even though he was a pagan king.

The Prophet Jeramiah

- His mentioned in the first chapter of the Book of Ezra.
- He foretold the time of the Babylonian captivity to the Kingdom of Judah when Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon conquered all the lands of the Jews and the surrounding lands.
- He prophesied the return of the exiles after a 70-year captivity in Babylon.
- The proclamation of Cyrus, King of Persia, fulfilled the prophecy given in Jeremiah 25:12:
“Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ says the LORD; ‘and I will make it a perpetual desolation.”

Nebuchadnezzar

- He was the King of Babylon.
- He took all the priestly vessels from the Temple after he destroyed the Temple.

Sheshbazzar

- He was appointed the governor of Judah by Cyrus, King of Persia.
- Cyrus gave him all the vessels of the house of God.

Cross-References between Chapter 1 of the Book of Ezra and Other Books:

The Book of Ezra	Other Old Testament Books	Commentary
<p>Ezra 1:1-3: “¹ Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also <i>put it</i> in writing, saying, ² Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which <i>is</i> in Judah. ³Who <i>is</i> among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which <i>is</i> in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He <i>is</i> God), which <i>is</i> in Jerusalem.”</p>	<p>2 Chronicles 36:22-33: “²² Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also <i>put it</i> in writing, saying, ²³ Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a <input type="checkbox"/>house at Jerusalem which <i>is</i> in Judah. Who <i>is</i> among you of all His people? May the Lord his God <i>be</i> with him, and let him go up!”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The repeated verses at the end of Chronicles are called “catch-lines.” In ancient times, catch-lines were often placed at the end of a scroll to facilitate the reader’s passing on to the correct second book-scroll after completing the first. • 2 Chronicles predated the book of Ezra, and since the two books share the same author, Ezra, he did not want to end his writings with the destruction of the Temple as well as the killings and captivity of many. • By writing the book of Ezra, as a continuation of 2 Chronicles, Ezra is giving the reader hope in the fulfillment of God’s promises in the Israelites return from captivity of Cyprus, King of Persia.

— Bible verses in this font are to be memorized.
 — Bible verses in this font are to be understood only.

The Book of Ezra

Ezra 1:4:

“⁴ And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which *is* in Jerusalem.”

Other Old Testament Books

2 Chronicles 36:22-33:

“¹ And the Lord said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. Afterward he will let you go from here. When he lets *you* go, he will surely drive you out of here altogether. ² Speak now in the hearing of the people, and let every man ask from his neighbor and every woman from her neighbor, articles of silver and articles of gold.””

Commentary

- The donations and gifts mentioned in the book of Ezra are similar to what the Egyptians did with the Israelites when they left Egypt.
- The difference here is that the gifts from the Egyptians to the Israelites were driven by the Egyptians’ fear from the God of Israel. Here, however, the gifts given to the Israelites were coming from a place of love as the Jews were loved by the Babylonians who lived in their midst.
- We see that Cyrus was insisting on the pagans, as well as the Hebrews, giving silver, gold, and goods to rebuild the Temple. Cyrus was going to send from his own freewill offering, many of the Temple treasures that had been taken and brought to Babylon. He asked the people of the land to do the same.

The Book of Ezra

Ezra 1:7:

“⁷ King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods;”

Other Old Testament Books

2 Kings 25:12-17:

“¹² But the captain of the guard left *some* of the poor of the land as vinedressers and farmers. ¹³ The bronze pillars that *were* in the house of the Lord, and the carts and the bronze Sea that *were* in the house of the Lord, the Chaldeans broke in pieces, and carried their bronze to Babylon. ¹⁴ They also took away the pots, the shovels, the trimmers, the spoons, and all the bronze utensils with which the priests ministered. ¹⁵ The firepans and the basins, the things of solid gold and solid silver, the captain of the guard took away. ¹⁶ The two pillars, one Sea, and the carts, which Solomon had made for the house of the Lord, the bronze of all these articles was beyond measure. ¹⁷ The height of one pillar was eighteen cubits, and the capital on it was of bronze. The height of the capital was three cubits, and the network and pomegranates all around the capital were all of bronze. The second pillar was the same, with a network.”

Commentary

- “The vessels of the house of the Lord” included the priestly hardware taken from the temple by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, after he destroyed the Temple.
- God preserved these vessels from destruction during the exile, for 70 years, and provided for their return to the Israelites.
- Cyrus did not recognize the false gods of the Babylonians. He took the items from the Temple in Jerusalem that had been placed in these temples of false gods, and sent them back to Judah. There were many golden cups and dishes even being used in the palace of the king. Cyrus seemed to gather up all he could find, and sent it back for the temple in Jerusalem.

The Book of Ezra

Ezra 1:8:

“⁸ and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.”

Other Old Testament Books

Haggai 1:1:

“¹ In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying,”

Commentary

- Cyrus, ordered Mithredath, the treasurer, that all the articles of the house of the Lord be delivered to Sheshbazzar, after the king appointed him a governor over Jerusalem and Judah.
- The verse reminds us that Sheshbazzar is the prince of Judah also Haggai 1:1 mentioned that Zerubbabel was the governor of Judah. This means that Sheshbazzar is the Persian name of Zerubbabel.

Further insights into King Cyrus' Character :

- Cyrus was a pagan king, but he was a vessel in the hand of the Lord to fulfill His plan. Cyrus is commended because he obeyed the Lord. He made an appeal in his entire kingdom, Mede and Persia that all the Jews in captivity may return to Jerusalem, he said that God commanded him to build Him a house in Jerusalem as prophesied by the prophets.
- According to Josephus, the Jewish historian, Daniel was the prime minister of Cyrus and he showed him what Isaiah had prophesied:
 - ❖ *Isaiah 44:28:*
“Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd,
And he shall perform all My pleasure,
Saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,”
And to the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.””.
- As Cyrus knew that there was a prophecy about him two centuries ago that he should build a house to the God of Heaven in Jerusalem, and that this prophecy was written before his birth. This encouraged him to fulfill the prophecy and say, “God commanded me”. There is another opinion that states that God appeared to him in a dream to confirm what was written in the prophecy.
- Cyrus respected the people's freedom, he gave to the people in captivity the freedom to stay or to return to their homeland. He ordered all his people, Jews or gentiles to contribute in the building of the house of the Lord.
- It was the Spirit of God who moved Cyrus to issue the order of his return, it was also the spirit of God who moved the chiefs of Judah, Benjamin, the priests, Levites, and others to go up to build the house of the Lord.
- Cyrus called upon all the people under his authority to hasten to give to the people of Israel silver, gold and other goods to donate to the house of God. Cyrus' demand for his people to donate the most precious money they have to complete the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem is a proof of his interest in completing the construction quickly.

Further insights into the Israelites at the time of Ezra:

- The decision to return to Jerusalem was a difficult decision for the Jews in Babylon.
- As Jerusalem was burned to ashes, remains without city walls, and surrounded by the enemies. Even the journey back to Jerusalem would be tough with their wives and children with the dangers of the road and bandits.
- In addition, at this point the Jews would have considered themselves strangers to Jerusalem. Some of them do not remember it and others were born in Babylon and have never visited it. Since Babylon was all they knew, they had a land, money, and a stable life in Babylon, which they called it home.
- The Jews definitely felt uneasy leaving Babylon, which is only an expected feeling, but God works in them so that they do not care about the trouble of the journey or the difficulties of building the Temple.
- After all, God was the one who moved Cyrus' heart to let them go and He is the one who would eventually provide for them.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- God is able to use even the Gentiles to glorify His name.
 - Cyrus symbolizes the Lord Christ who freed us from the bondage of sin.
 - However, while Cyrus is ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth, Christ rules all the kingdoms of heavens and earth, and we trust that He sits on the throne, above all the thrones.
- Man stands confused, unable to predict what will happen in the near or far future.
 - Presidents and rulers of this world worry about the future with too many aspects being unpredictable.
 - But we trust that above all the lords, powers, and leaders, whether they are visible or invisible, there is the throne of God the Pantocrator, ruler of all. If we were to follow the human logic, it would not have been possible for the people in the captivity to believe that a pagan king believed that the Lord God of heaven had given him all the kingdoms of the earth and commanded him to build him a house in Jerusalem
 - We stand in astonishment in front of the good hand of God that works wonders everywhere, in ways that no one had ever expected.

Chapter 2:

The Return to Jerusalem:

1. In this chapter, we find the names of those who returned to Jerusalem the mention of their names is to honor them.
 - ❖ *1 Samuel 2:30:*
“for those who honor Me I will honor”.
2. Those who honored God returned to Jerusalem despite the hardships and the difficulty of the journey, so God honors them by mentioning their names in the Bible.
3. This presents itself as a symbol of repentance and the return to the Church. Those who return will have their names written in the Book of Life. In addition, this mention of the names encourages others to follow in the same path.
 - ❖ *Revelation 3:5:*
“⁵ He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”
4. They were also interested in names and genealogy because of inheritance and the identification of family lines and priesthood.
5. There are those who could not prove their genealogy but they longed to return to Jerusalem, which put to shame those who could prove their genealogy but refused to return to Jerusalem.
6. In this chapter, we find the names of those who returned to Jerusalem the mention of their names is to honor them.

Zerubbabel:

7. He was born in Babylon, the land of captivity.
8. He was the leader of the first group that returned to Jerusalem along with Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.
9. He returned to Jerusalem to build the temple, and govern the people during this time.
10. He is one of the descendants of the kings of Judah.

❖ *1 Chronicles 3:16-19:*

*“¹⁶ The sons of Jehoiakim were Jeconiah his son and Zedekiah his son.
¹⁷ And the sons of Jeconiah were Assir, Shealtiel his son,
¹⁸ and Malchiram, Pedaiah, Shenazzar, Jecamiah, Hoshama, and Nedabiah.
¹⁹ The sons of Pedaiah were Zerubbabel and Shimei. The sons of Zerubbabel were Meshullam, Hananiah, Shelomith their sister,”*

11. Christ came from his descendants.

❖ *Matthew 1:12:*

“¹² And after they were brought to Babylon, Jeconiah begot Shealtiel, and Shealtiel begot Zerubbabel.”

12. He is the grandfather of Christ in the flesh, but a symbol of Christ who was born in this world. This can be seen as both Christ and Zerubbabel were:

- Born in a sinful world / land of captivity
- Kingly descendants of David
- Leading the people back into freedom from sin / captivity
- On a mission to repair the middle ground between man and God / temple

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- Each one of us has once been captive in a strange sinful land, away from God, the source of life. Take some time to meditate on what you would do to have your name written in the Book of Life.

❖ *Ezra 2:62:*

“⁶² These sought their listing among those who were registered by genealogy, but they were not found; therefore they were excluded from the priesthood as defiled. ⁶³ And the governor said to them that they should not eat of the most holy things till a priest could consult with the Urim and Thummim ”

- Those who did not listen to God’s call to return to Jerusalem lost their priestly privilege and blessing.
Is this considered a lesson for us? Meditate on how we can pay more attention to God’s voice so we don’t lose our place in heaven and have our names written in the Book of life?

Chapter 3:

Offering Sacrifices, Building the Temple and Celebrating feasts:

13. Verses 1 to 3: Building the altar
14. Verses 4 to 6: Feast celebration
15. Verses 7 to 12: Building the foundation of Temple
16. The first group returned to Jerusalem. Eight months have already gone after their return.
17. On the 7th Jewish month which is the time of the feast, they gathered as one man, and built the altar, offered the sacrifices, and began to build the foundation of the temple.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- We should never despair as we know that no matter how great the work before us is, God is always helps us to start and complete the work. God rejoices in our beginnings no matter how small. We must rejoice and praise and thank God for the beginnings of His works with us. If God begins, then He will continue what He started, and if there is sorrow and weeping, let it be upon our sins, and if we weep for our sins, this will become joy.

❖ *Psalm 30:5:*

*"⁵ For His anger is but for a moment,
His favor is for life;
Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy comes in the morning."*

- What is the connection between the following verses and this chapter?

Other Old Testament Books	Chapter 3 of Ezra	Commentary
<p>Numbers 29:12-13: “¹² ‘On the fifteenth day of the seventh month you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work, and you shall keep a feast to the Lord seven days. ¹³ You shall present a burnt offering, an offering made by fire as a sweet aroma to the Lord: thirteen young bulls, two rams, <i>and</i> fourteen lambs in their first year. They shall be without blemish.”</p>	<p>Ezra 3:1-5: “¹ And when the seventh month had come, and the children of Israel <i>were</i> in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and his brethren, arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as <i>it is</i> written in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³ Though fear <i>had come</i> upon them because of the people of those countries, they set the altar on its ^[c]bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, <i>both</i> the morning and evening burnt offerings. ⁴ They also kept the Feast of Tabernacles, as <i>it is</i> written, and <i>offered</i> the daily burnt offerings in the number required by ordinance for each day.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the Feast of Tabernacles falls and they were able to celebrate it as it is written in the Law of Moses. • As it is written, they resided in a tabernacle (tent) for seven days, where the people are reminded that they are stranger to the world and be attached to God. • God wanted to confirm in the hearts of His people who return from the captivity that their goal in life is to worship Him and not to be preoccupied with possessions and properties.

Other Old Testament Books**Chapter 3 of Ezra****Commentary****Psalm 126:5-6:**

⁵ Those who sow in tears
Shall reap in joy.

⁶ He who continually
goes forth weeping,
Bearing seed for sowing,
Shall doubtless come
again with rejoicing,
Bringing his sheaves *with*
him.”

Ezra 3:10-13:

¹⁰ When the builders laid the
foundation of the temple of
the Lord, the ¹⁰ priests stood in
their apparel with trumpets,
and the Levites, the sons of
Asaph, with cymbals, to
praise the Lord, according to
the ordinance ¹⁰ of David king
of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang
responsively, praising and
giving thanks to the Lord:

“For *He is good*,
For His
mercy *endures* forever toward
Israel.”

Then all the people shouted
with a great shout, when they
praised the Lord, because the
foundation of the house of
the Lord was laid.

¹² But many of the priests and
Levites and heads of the
fathers' *houses*, old men who
had seen the first temple,
wept with a loud voice when
the foundation of this temple
was laid before their eyes. Yet
many shouted aloud for
joy, ¹³ so that the people could
not discern the noise of the
shout of joy from the noise of
the weeping of the people, for
the people shouted with a
loud shout, and the sound
was heard afar off.”

- When the elders, the priests, and the Levites saw that the temple was founded, they cried with a loud voice of joy, rejoicing in the reestablishment of the Temple of God which they had seen before it was were burned by Nebuchadnezzar.
- The cheers of joy were mixed with weeping and the sound was heard afar off.

Other Old Testament Books

1 Corinthians 12:12:

“¹² For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also *is* Christ.”

Chapter 3 of Ezra

Ezra 3:8:

“⁸ Now in the second month of the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all those who had come out of the captivity to Jerusalem, began *work* and appointed the Levites from twenty years old and above to oversee the work of the house of the Lord.”

Commentary

- We see the unity in the gathering of all the people of Israel as one man to build the altar, they gathered for a great goal, the worship of God.

Psalm 135

(The Second Hoos):

“³ Praise the Lord, for the Lord *is* good; Sing praises to His name, for *it is* pleasant.”

“¹³ Your name, O Lord, *endures* forever, Your fame, O Lord, throughout all generations.”

Ezra 3:11:

“¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord: “For *He is* good, For His mercy *endures* forever toward Israel.” Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”

- They built the altar and Temple with praises and thanksgiving and hope for God to bless the work.

Chapter 4:

6 Kings:

1. Esar-haddon, king of Assur: deported a large population of Israelites from Palestine.
2. Cyrus, king of Persia: commanded the Israelites to build the Temple without any help from the unbelievers.
3. Darius, king of Persia: allowed the work of building the Temple to continue on as originally planned.
4. Ahasuerus, king of Persia: was surrounded by people who were trying to turn him against the people that had been allowed to return to Judah.
5. Artaxerxes, king of Persia: was easily swayed against Jerusalem.
6. Asnapper, king of Assyria: completed the transplanting in Samaria of peoples that Esar-haddon had played a major part in relocating.

The obstacles that the enemy planted to stop the construction of the Temple (in chronological order):

1. The enemies of Judah and Benjamin, who dwelt nearby, heard that they had established the temple and were trying to complete its construction. They feared that the Jews might have power to expel them from their country or to harm them. They set plans and plots to stop the building of the temple and reduce the power of those who returned from the captivity.
2. The enemies of Judah and Benjamin approached Zerubbabel and the elders and asked them to share with them in the building of the house of God they said “for we like you seek your God and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here”.
3. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the elders answered them and said “you have nothing in common with us building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the Lord God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us.
4. The enemies of the people of God also resorted to official complaints that they sent to the kings of Persia. It may have begun from the days of Cyrus but he did not respond to them.
5. New complaint was written by a well-known person among the nations called Rehum the commander (set by the Persian as governor over areas surrounding Jerusalem and Judah). His scribe Shimshi helped him writing the complaint. Rehum wrote this complaint to King Artaxerxes.
6. The enemies accused the Jews that ascended from Babylon to Jerusalem, that they were building Jerusalem the rebellious city. They also accused the Jews of building the wall of Jerusalem and restoring the foundations of the city and claimed that the Jews would rebel against the king if they complete the walls. And that they will not pay tribute, custom or toll and it will damage the revenue of the kings.

Matched the Bible reference to Commentary:

Chapter 4 of Ezra	Commentary
Ezra 4:2: “ ² they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers’ <i>houses</i> , and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you <i>do</i> ; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.””	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The deception that they want to help the Jews in building.
Ezra 4:4: “ ⁴ Then the people of the land tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building,”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intimidating the people so that the building is not completed.
Ezra 4:5: “ ⁵ and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paying bribes to the king of Persia counselors to speak evil against the Jews in front of the king.
Ezra 4:6: “ ⁶ In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Writing direct complaints against Jews.

Chapter 4 of Ezra

Commentary

Ezra 4:14:

“¹⁴ Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king’s dishonor; therefore we have sent and informed the king,”

- Showing loyalty to the king to raise his anger against the Jews.

Ezra 4:15:

“¹⁵ that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. And you will find in the book of the records and know that this city *is* a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed.”

- False accusations against the Jews bringing up all the old mistakes from hundreds years ago and called Jerusalem the rebellious city.

Ezra 4:20:

“²⁰ There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all *the region* beyond the River; and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them.”

- They took advantage of the love of the Persian to collect tributes to support their armies and told the king that if the Jews complete the construction they will not pay any tribute.

Chapter Summary:

1. Verses 1 to 5: Rejecting non-loyal company
2. Verses 6 to 10: False complaints
3. Verses 11 to 13: Fabrications
4. Verse 14: Showing loyalty to authorities
5. Verses 15 to 16: A rebellious country from long ago
6. Verses 17 to 24: Stopping the building of the Temple

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- The people of the land weakened Judah's hands and shake them away from the building. Meditate on:
 - What drives you away from the work of God and the relationship with Him and make you afraid to be with Him?
 - What are you doing about it?
- They described Jerusalem in the letter to King Artaxerxes as the rebellious and evil city. Meditate on:
 - Do your deeds and behaviour cause hurt to the image of God in front of others?
 - What could be done so that people see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven?



The Book of Ezra

Part 2: Chapters 5 – 10

Chapter 5: Internal reform and call for building

The devil resists the work (Ezra 5:1-2)

- We have seen in the last verses of the previous chapter that the devil stands with all his power against the building, but has succeeded in stopping the work.
- Does the devil have any power to stop the work of God? Certainly, the devil has no power to stop God's work if we do not give him a chance to do so.
- In reference to the Prophecy of Haggai the Prophet, we find that the people neglected the house of the Lord and everyone was interested in building his own house and paying attention to its adornment with exaggerated attention.
 - ❖ *Haggai 1:3-4:*
“³ Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ⁴ “*Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?*””
- Therefore, the king could not have stopped the building if it was not for the laziness and negligence of the people.
- Yet God did not leave the situation as it was, but sent two who prophesied with power in the name of the God of Israel against them.
 - ❖ *Zechariah 4:6:*
“⁶ So he answered and said to me:
“This *is* the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel:
‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’
Says the Lord of hosts.”

- The prophets had power and authority from the Spirit of God, because their purpose was the glory of God's name.
- Roles of people who took care of the building
 1. Prophets: Haggai and Zechariah
 2. Governor: Zerubbabel
 3. High priest: Jeshua
- Note that the subject of the prophecy of Haggai was to rebuke the neglect of the house of the Lord and encouraging the restart of the building. Zerubbabel and Joshua responded.
 - Reconcile with God so you can reconcile with yourself and with others then even the enemies will work for your account.
- Tattenai was the governor of Syria, Kelikia, the Arab desert and Samaria.
- Shethar-Boznai was the governor scribe.



The eyes of God are on His people (Ezra 5:3-7)

- If the eye of God is on us, who can frighten us?
- When the way of a man pleases God, He surrounds him His divine care. He is also able to transform the hearts of non-believers rulers to work to what suits His purposes.

Tattenai's letter to Darius (Ezra 5:8-12)

- Tattenai did not know the true God, but the hand of God was on him, he felt fear and dread from God. We note that God caused His fear to fall on the governor because the people began to care and work. There was no authority for the devil to stop the work. So whatever the size of the difficulties, it is reduced when it is in the hand of God.
- However, God did not interfere with the Zerubbabel and the people before they started themselves. Even if the problems are like mountains, they become easy to handle when God interferes.
 - ❖ *Zechariah 4:7:*
“7 ‘Who are you, O great mountain?
Before Zerubbabel *you shall become a plain!*
And he shall bring forth the capstone
With shouts of “Grace, grace to it!” ’ ”

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- The eye of God was on the elders and the building did not stop.
 - How confident are you in the Lord your God and His watchful eye over you even though you are different from those around you?
- Zerubbabel and the elders began to build the house of God, which is in Jerusalem despite the enemies and their plots.
 - What do you do when you are surrounded by persecutions, problems, and wars? Be honest with yourself.

Chapter 6: Darius the king

Cyrus' decree and God's care (Ezra 6:1-5)

- The Jews informed King Darius that King Cyrus had issued a decree for them to build the house of God.
- Then Darius the King commanded for a search to be made where the treasures are stored in Babylon. Indeed, the scroll was found.
- Darius the king, then, ordered the governor to let the Jews rebuild the house of God moreover he issued a decree that the full cost is to be paid from the royal treasury out of the taxes also whatever is needed from animals for the offerings to be given to them without delay.
 - We also ought to build the house of God in our hearts as He asks us especially that He has given to us all the possibilities to do it.

Darius fear God (Ezra 6:6-12)

- God turned the situation in favor of His people, the king looks for the Cyrus' decree and it seems that he was influenced by the style of the decree beside God's good hand that works in the hearts of kings and rulers for the benefit of His people.
- In the king's message, we find a picture of his love for this work. It is clear that Darius the pagan king revered to the living God. He asks for His blessing and asks the people of God to pray for him and for his children.
 - Here we see God stopping the devil's work when there are some sincere people working with honesty. The devil stopped the work in the building, but we see that the building restarted with more blessings.
 - Believers should pray for all people, especially the kings, the presidents and those who are in authority. (1 Timothy 2:1-2) – There is a litany in the Divine Liturgy for the presidents and those in authorities. "Remember, O Lord, our president your servant, keep him safe,"

The Joy of the people (Ezra 6:13-22)

- The celebration was great everyone was joyful because the temple was rebuilt after many years. Now they have a place to worship, offer sacrifices and celebrate their feasts.
- Solomon thanked God and praised him when the first temple was built and consecrated.
- During the consecration, they offered 12 male goats, among other things.
- Number 12 indicates the presence of all tribes and their unity.
- Discipline brought them back as one people.
 - St. Ignatius El-Norani said, “It is important that you gather more intensely to give thanks and glory to God. When you meet repeatedly in the liturgies, the forces of the devil disintegrate in front of your faith.”
- They celebrated the Passover.
 - With the first Passover, they were freed from the bondage of Pharaoh, went through the wilderness and entered the Promised Land.
 - Now that they celebrate the Passover, they remember the work of God for their salvation and that what was done is the gift of God their Savior.
- The Old Testament mentions 5 celebrations of Passover signifying the reform of worship and the renewal of the covenant between God and His people.
 1. At mount Sinai (Numbers 9:5)
 2. In Gilgal (Joshua 5:10)
 3. At the time of King Hezekiah
 4. At the time of King Josiah
 5. At the time of Zerubbabel (Ezra 6)

❖ *Ezra 6:22*

“²² And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the Lord made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”

- We note here “with joy”, joy follows the renewal of the Covenant with God through repentance we only rejoice in the sacrifice the cross, our real Passover.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- King Darius ordered the governor to give the people of Israel all what they need to build the temple.
- The heavenly King gives us more than what we ask or think.
 - What is your attitude towards these blessings and gifts in your life?

❖ *Ezra 6:12*

“¹² And may the God who causes His name to dwell there destroy any king or people who put their hand to alter it, or to destroy this house of God which is in Jerusalem. I Darius issue a decree; let it be done diligently.”

- Do you trust the power of God to protect you and protect His Church and His people these days? And how do you behave in light of this trust?
- “And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy”
 - How have you experienced the joy and work of the Lord in your life?



Chapter 7: The return of the second group from captivity

- With the end of chapter 6, we concluded the story of the return of first group from captivity under the leadership of Zerubbabel.
- The period between the chapter 6 and chapter 7 is about 58 years (516 BC to 458 BC). During this period, the events in the Book of Esther took place.
- We also have writings recorded in this period (e.g. part of the Book of Zechariah and possibly Malachi and Joel.)
- During this period, also, some of the people who returned from captivity married pagan women and they were going to return to idol worshiping because of these marriages.
- Because God loves them, He sent them Ezra the scribe and priest to do some internal reform-the expulsion of the pagan women with their children.
- In this section, we do not hear any more about Zerubbabel, Joshua or the two prophets Zechariah and Haggai.

The good hand of God (Ezra 7:1-10)

- Ezra starts his talk by declaring that he is a descendent of Aaron and confirmed that it is the good hand of God on him to lead the people, as God gave him grace in the eyes of Artaxerxes the king.
- Ezra
- Son of Seraiah.
- Hebrew name meaning, “help”- God sent His people help to return to His Law and to purify themselves from the sins.
- Named the scribe because of his job and he was skilled at it.
 - Ezra was a staff member of the Persian court and an advisor to King Artaxerxes.
- He expended his knowledge and talent in copying the Law, studying it and teaching it to the people.
- He was skilled not only in terms of the writing but also in terms of learning, studying, understanding and acting according to the Law.
 - ❖ **Psalm 45:1**
“¹ My tongue *is* the pen of a ready writer.”
- Ezra followed the steps of David the prophet who had abilities and experiences, yet he considered himself was a stranger who needed the commandments of God to be his leader, guide, companion and comforter. He said:
 - ❖ **Psalm 119:19**
“¹⁹ I *am* a stranger in the earth;
Do not hide Your commandments from me.”
- His feeling that he was a stranger made him stick to the commandment to support him in his life on earth and lead to heaven.
- Strangers on earth need the commandments of God to protect them from the actions of the body and the love of the world.
- Those who follow these commandments become accustomed to them and cannot be overcome by the world.

The king's message to Ezra (Ezra 7:11-26)

- With God's help, Ezra had a great influence on the king.
- This appeared in this letter which the king wrote to Ezra calling him "teacher of the law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:12)
- According to the king, the God of Ezra was the God of the whole heaven.
- The message of the king reveals the hand of God and His work for the benefit of His people:
 1. The pagan king urged the priests and the people to go to Jerusalem to resume the worship and reform the people.
 2. He called Ezra the teacher of the law of the God of heaven; he saw in him a unique heavenly touch.
 3. The king and his counselors freely offered gifts and vessels to the people because the vessels of the Lord were returned by Cyrus.
 4. The pagan king urged the Jewish people and their priests to donate to the house of their God.
 5. The king left all decisions in the hands of Ezra according to the law of God and gave him authority to administer justice and judge for all the people wherever they were across the river and whoever does not obey the law of God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.

Praise be to the Lord (Ezra 7:27-28)

- Ezra thanked and praised the Lord for His divine work on the heart of the pagan king who was supporting the people of God.
 - The king had helped them financially and gave them authorities with great generosity.
- Ezra praised God saying: "To bring honor to the house of the Lord"
 - Honor is not in regards to the building and decoration but in regards to the sanctification of house of God and the sanctification of the people and the priests.
- The king's message and actions revealed that what Ezra would accomplish was from the hand of the Lord.
- In chapter 7 and 8 Ezra mentioned "the hand of God" 6 times, as he attributed all the work to the hand of God and not to himself.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- The king gave Ezra everything he asked for.
 - ❖ Ezra 7:6
“*6* The king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him.”
 - How much do you trust and believe that God can transform everything happens to you into something good according to His will?
- Ezra devoted his heart to God.
 - ❖ Ezra 7:10
“*10* For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do *it*, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.”
 - How do you prepare your heart to seek God and understand His Laws and commandments?
 - How did you teach them to others?
- Ezra proclaimed a fast to all people to humble themselves before God to ask Him a straight path.
 - Ezra asked for a straight path what do you ask for, what are your requests from God in your fasts and prayers?

Chapter 8: The second group journey and arrival

- This chapter tells the story of a journey that looks long but joyful; symbolizing our journey from earth to heaven.
- Ezra and about 8000 people left Babylon to Jerusalem
- Ezra had already revealed the good hand of God, who worked on the heart of the king and his counselors for the good of the people of God.
- Now he seeks the hand of God to work in the hearts of those who accompanied him on this journey from Babylon to Jerusalem.
- It was not an easy decision or journey.
 - It was hard for the people to leave their work and their business and return to Jerusalem, a city that has been destroyed and surrounded by enemies from all sides.
 - The journey was harsh (about 1400 kilometers walk) and took them about four months.
- Ezra checked among the people and there were no Levites.
- He sent messengers asking to send Levites and temple servants to accompany them on this journey.
- Through God's helping hand, some Levites and temple servants went with them.
- He prepared for the journey by fasting for three days.
- At the end of the journey, he stayed for three days offering thanksgiving to God who accompanied them and saved them from the dangers of the road.
- The group was carrying treasures of about one million pounds (vs. 26-27).
- Ezra did not ask to be accompanied by the soldiers to protect them, he left everything completely in God's hand (vs. 22).
- Ezra was a man of great wisdom, he recorded the weight of the treasures accurately before and after the journey. lest the enemies distort his image, and say that he took for himself silver or gold, (vs. 24 -34).

- Why did God allow the people to return from Babylon to Jerusalem in three groups with three different leaders (Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah)?
 - God could have let King Cyrus issue an order to bring all the Jews back together, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua.
 - However, God wanted them to have free will; He did not want them to return out of obligation.
 - God wants all believers to be spiritual leaders whether they were of royal descendants, priests or regular people.

Leader	Symbol
Zerubbabel (one of the descendants of King David)	He is a symbol of Christ the descendant of King David
Ezra (the priest)	He is a symbol of Christ the Word of God and the Chief Priest
Nehemiah (the faithful)	He is a symbol of Christ the Faithful

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- In the depths of every Man's heart, there is a desire to the way to get to heaven.
- The true believer realizes that he/she is merely a guest on this earth and that his/her true home is heaven.
- Though it is hard, but it is secret and enjoyable journey, and among the hardships that we meet in our lives, our eyes must look toward the Divine Throne.

Chapter 9: Repentance and humility in the name of all the people

The news of the unfaithfulness (vs. 1-3)

- The second group arrived to Jerusalem under the leadership of Ezra.
- About four months later, the leaders of the people came to Ezra to tell him that some of the men had married pagan women.
- Ezra's joy turned into grief and bitterness.
- This was a great unfaithfulness against God because of which God allowed the Jews to be in captivity in Babylon for 70 years

Ezra's humility (vs. 3-5)

- When Ezra heard about this, he did not take the judge's position to judge the people although it was in his power.
- He tore his clothes, and pulled the hair of his head and beard, and he sat down appalled all day long.
- He saw this infidelity must be dealt with by true repentance from the heart not just by giving orders.

Prayer and confession (vs. 6-15)

- Ezra gathered the people for the evening sacrifice.
- He offered a strong prayer with a confession that touched the heart of the people.
- He poured his heart before God, acknowledging the past sins of the people.
- He considered what the people had done as if he had done it himself.
- He admitted on behalf of the people that he had already sinned and that they deserved to be destroyed and they are ashamed to stand before Him.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- God showed mercy to the people of Israel.
 - ❖ Ezra 9:13
"13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, since You our God have punished us less than our iniquities *deserve*, and have given us *such* deliverance as this,"
- How do you see the work of God with you?
- Is his mercy and his patience with your sins much more than what you deserve?

Chapter 10: The Effective Prayer

This chapter is divided into three parts:

1. The shepherd is repentant in the name of the people (v.1-6)
2. The heaven weeps and everything moves (v.7-17)
3. The names of the repentant (v.18-44)

The book ends by showing the effect of Ezra's humble prayer, where the Spirit of God moved the souls for repentance.

- The Children also wept with the rest of the people (v.1)
- Shekariah whose father married a pagan woman came and confessed about the sin of his father, but with the spirit of hope in forgiveness (v.2-3)
- The courageous Ezra needed encouragement from the people (v.5)
- To deal with the situation of the pagan women, The chief priests and the Levites expelled them with their children who did not leave the worship of idols and made a covenant with God (v.2-3)
- After the order to fix the situation was made, Ezra remained fasting he mourned before the Lord (v.6)
- An order was made for an urgent gathering of all the people within three days and anyone who failed to be there would have been subject to a severe punishment (v.8)
- There was heavy rains, as if the heaven was sharing with the tears of Ezra and his people (v.12)
- A decision was made to form committees to study each person's situation
- Ezra then mentioned the names of those who repented.

➤ *Lessons Learned:*

- Whatever the sin is there is always hope for repentance.
 - ❖ Ezra 10:2-3
"2 We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. 3 Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God"
 - How do you benefit from his hope to return to God?
 - ❖ Ezra 10:6
"6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib; and *when* he came there, he ate no bread and drank no water, for he mourned because of the guilt of those from the captivity."
 - How do you feel about others' sins and mistakes?
 - How do you deal with them?
 - Do you judge them?
 - Do you grieve for them?
 - Do you pray for them?

The Spiritual Struggle and God's Grace

Why Do We Struggle in Life?

The word struggle is the same as strive or try hard.

- With all the struggle and effort that we have to put in our spiritual life, we should never forget God's grace, which supports us.
- It is normal that we do not like the struggle but what makes us overcome the struggle is the grace of God.
- From the following verses we can understand the importance of struggle in our spiritual life:

❖ *Genesis 3:17*

"17 Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it':
"Cursed *is* the ground for your sake;
In toil you shall eat *of* it
All the days of your life."

❖ *Sirach 40:1*

"1 Great labour is created for all men, and a heavy yoke is upon the children of Adam, from the day of their coming out of their mother's womb, until the day of their burial into the mother of all."

❖ *Proverbs 14:23*

"23 In all labor there is profit,
But idle chatter *leads* only to poverty."

❖ *Luke 13:24*

"24 "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able."

❖ *2 Peter 1:10*

"10 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;"

❖ *2 Peter 3:14*

“¹⁴ Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;”

❖ *Proverbs 12:27*

“²⁷ The lazy *man* does not roast what he took in hunting,
But diligence *is* man’s precious possession.”

❖ *Revelation 12:11*

“¹¹ And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

❖ *Acts 26:7*

“⁷ To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving *God* night and day, hope to attain. For this hope’s sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.”

❖ *1 Corinthians 9:25*

“²⁵ And everyone who competes *for the prize* is temperate in all things. Now they *do it* to obtain a perishable crown, but we *for an imperishable crown.*”

❖ *2 Timothy 2:5*

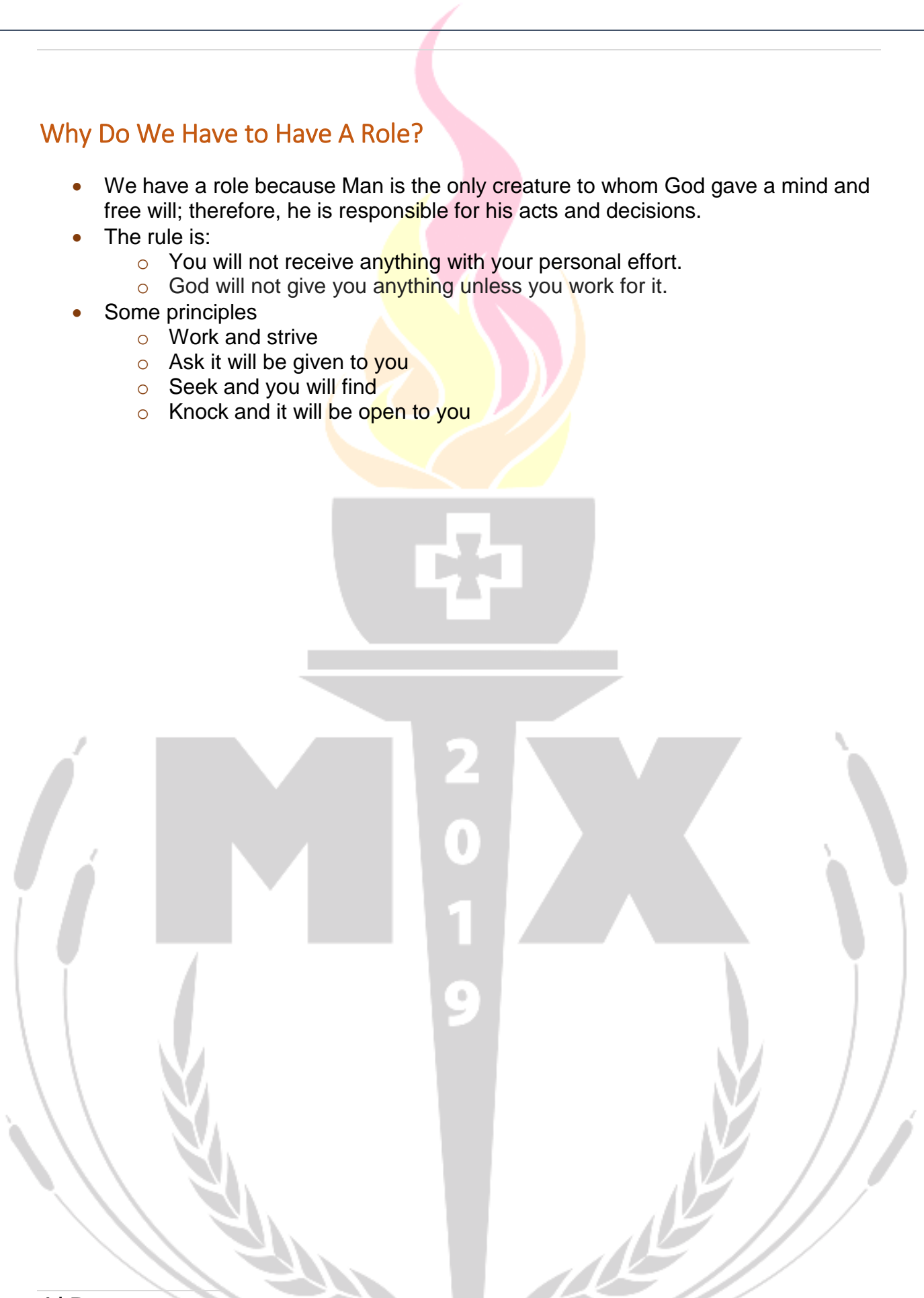
“⁵ And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”

What is Grace?

- Grace is the free gift from God to us.
- It is God working in our lives and being with us.
- This free gift does not mean that we be lazy:
 - Grace is like Christ opening for us the door of our prison cell.
 - Our works is when we walk out of the cell.
 - Without God's grace, the door is locked and we cannot leave the cell.
 - Without our works, the door is open but we are choosing to stay inside the cell.
- God gives grace and we respond with our acts.
- In your prayers ask:
 - God guide me to Your righteousness
 - God fill me with Your grace
 - God Sanctify me with Your Spirit
- When God sees the struggle of Man, He sends him help through His grace.
- The Bible teaches us that we should grow in the grace;
 - ❖ *2 Peter 3:18*
"18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."
- When we struggle and grow in the grace of God, we will know Him.
Meaning: knowing God wholeheartedly as a fruit of the work of His grace.
- From the following verses we can understand the characteristics of God's grace:
 - ❖ *Ephesians 2:8*
"8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,"
 - ❖ *Acts 20:32*
"32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."
 - ❖ *Sirach 40:17*
"17 Grace is like a paradise in blessings, and mercy remains for ever."
 - ❖ *2 Timothy 2:1*
"1 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."
 - ❖ *Ephesians 2:7*
"7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

Why Do We Have to Have A Role?

- We have a role because Man is the only creature to whom God gave a mind and free will; therefore, he is responsible for his acts and decisions.
- The rule is:
 - You will not receive anything with your personal effort.
 - God will not give you anything unless you work for it.
- Some principles
 - Work and strive
 - Ask it will be given to you
 - Seek and you will find
 - Knock and it will be open to you



Struggle and Grace Together:

- Man cannot be saved by his struggle only.
- Our Lord Jesus said, “For without me you can do nothing” John 15:5.
- Human efforts by themselves are not enough save you without God’s grace.
- However, God’s grace is also not going to save you by itself.
- As St. Augustine said, ““He who created us without our help will not save us without our consent.”
- Therefore, grace is not a call to laziness and idleness; grace does not mean that we do not have to do our part.
- Example: Joshua and Moses
 - Joshua the son of Nun was the commander of the Israelites army; during the war with the Amalakites he was fighting the enemies.
 - At the same time Moses was on the top of the mountain raising up his hands in prayer (Exodus 17:11).
 - Did the Israelites win because of Moses prayers or because of Joshua’s fighting?
 - The answer is both!
 - Joshua could not have won without Moses’ prayer (God’s help), also Moses prayer by itself was not enough for the army to win without Joshua fighting the enemies.
 - Struggle and prayer worked together to give victory over the enemies.
 - In Exodus God asked Moses to go to Pharaoh and ask him to let the people of Israel go, any effort that you put has a value in God’s eyes.
 - ❖ *Matthew 10:42*
“⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold *water* in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.”
 - However in other situations where Man might be powerless and needs to rely on God’s grace, God will take care of him
 - ❖ *Exodus 14:13-14*
“¹³ And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.””
- Every time you stand to pray, you obtain grace from God, prayer is a spiritual struggle, so make an effort to do what you can and God’s grace will do what you cannot do.
- When you make the effort to stand in prayer with focus and understanding, God’s grace gives you comfort and joy, and you will receive more blessings.

The Communion of the Holy Spirit:

- What does communion or fellowship with the Holy Spirit mean?
- It is the association of two working together (the Holy Spirit and man).
- The Holy Spirit is able to help you but does not want to do this alone. He wants you to work with Him.
- God does not want to force you to do something without your free will because if you do a work without your free will, you will not be rewarded.
 - ❖ *2 Corinthians 13:14*
“¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”
- If it is the Holy Spirit who works alone, why then do we see good people and bad people?

Does The Work of God’s Grace Cancel Man’s Free Will?

- NO! Your freedom is still there
- Analogy 1:
 - Grace is a weapon given to you, you can use it to fight and win, or you can ignore it and fight the devil with no weapon.
 - Weapons by themselves cannot win a war without you using them.
- Analogy 2 – mentioned previously:
 - Grace is like Christ opening for us the door of our prison cell.
 - Our works is when we walk out of the cell.
 - Without God’s grace, the door is locked and we cannot leave the cell.
 - Without our works, the door is open but we are choosing to stay inside the cell.
- You have the choice to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit in you and work with Him for your salvation or you can do the opposite.
- That is why the bible warns us:
 - ❖ *1 Thessalonians 5:19*
“¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit.”
 - ❖ *Ephesians 4:30*
“³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”
 - ❖ *Revelation 3:20*
“²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”

Examples from the Bible:

1. Verses:

Verse	Your Role	God's Grace
Matthew 7:7 “7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”	Ask Seek Knock	It will be given to you You will find It will be opened to you
James 4:8 “8 Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse <i>your</i> hands, <i>you</i> sinners; and purify <i>your</i> hearts, <i>you</i> double-minded.”	Draw near to God Cleanse your hands purify your hearts	He will draw near you
Malachi 3:10 “10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this,” Says the Lord of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you <i>such</i> blessing That <i>there will not be room enough to receive it.</i> ”	Give the tithes	He will give you many blessings
1 Peter 3:9 “9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”	Not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling	You will inherit a blessing
John 14:27 “27 Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”	Trust in God	He will give you peace

Verse	Your Role	God's Grace
John 15:5 “ ⁵ “I am the vine, you <i>are</i> the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”	Abide in God	Bear fruit
1 Peter 3:7-8 “ ⁷ Husbands, likewise, dwell with <i>them</i> with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as <i>being</i> heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered. ⁸ Finally, all of you <i>be</i> of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, <i>be</i> tenderhearted, <i>be</i> courteous;”	Be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous	Help me to repent
1 Corinthians 3:8 “ ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.”	Be watchful and vigilant	He will reward you
1 Corinthians 3:9 “ ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, <i>you are</i> God’s building.”	Be willing to accept God’s work within you	Steadfastness in the faith

2. Biblical Events:

A. The miracle of feeding the multitude (Luke 9:10-18)

- Out of compassion, the disciples asked our Lord to send the people away because the place was deserted and there was no food. However, He said to them, “You give them something to eat.”
- He was asking for their contribution even if it was something small.
- The Lord did not need the five loaves and the two fish to feed the multitude but this represent the small human effort that we put in the hand of God and that the grace of God support and does miracle.

B. Raising of Lazarus (John 11)

- The Lord asked them to take away the stone.
- This is the human role that they could offer, a simple effort they could afford and God will do the divine part that no one can do except Him.
- We cannot switch roles.
- God does 99% of what we need and He leaves 1% for us, this we must do.

C. St. Paul’s talk about growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

❖ *1 Corinthians 3:6*

“⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.”

- St. Paul planted the seed of the Gospel in Corinth, Apollos watered it through his service and minister and the seed brought fruit.
- The fruit was not because of St. Paul or Apollos work but by the grace of God.
- Only God give man the fruit of the Spirit as the free gift.
- You have to plant the seeds and water them (Human role) but it is God who make them grow (God’s role)

D. Elisha and the widow’s oil (2 Kings 4:1-6)

- Elisha asked the widow “What do you have in the house?” as if he wanted to ask her what can you offer?
- Even if it is something simple, weak or small God can add to it His power and His blessings.
- She said that she had only a jar of oil (Human effort very small and weak but very important for God to work).
- The widow did not have any vessels in the house for the prophet to fill with oil.

❖ *2 Kings 4:3-4*

“³Then he said, “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few. ⁴And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour it into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones.””

- She starts pouring oil in the vessels, when she run out of vessels the oil stopped.
- If the widow thought in herself that the little oil she had was not enough she would not have received the blessing.
- We also ought to pull all our effort in everything we do to receive God's blessings.
- When Elisha asked the widow to borrow empty vessels this was a test of her faith (she had to believe and trust).

- "Do not gather just a few"- this should be a principle in our life. Do not give just a few of your time in prayer, bible reading, time of service and spend more time with God, and God will give us generously.
- "Shut your door"- We have to have a deep and private relationship with God.
 - ❖ *Matthew 6:6*
 "6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who *is* in the secret *place*; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly."

- Why did she go back to Elisha? She felt that the oil that she received was from God. She went back to the man of God to ask what to do with it.
- All our talents, time and special abilities are from God; we have to ask Him to guide us and tell us what He wants us to do with them.
- As Elisha answered the widow:
 - ❖ *2 Kings 4:7*
 "7 "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons live on the rest.""
- Likewise, when we serve God it should be under the guidance of our father of confession.

Lessons Learned:

- The cessation of oil was associated with amount of vessels.
- The defect is never from the grace of God that is flowing towards us, but it is from our reception and readiness.
- The work of the grace of God in us is the secret of our blessing and as much as we give Him the opportunity to satisfy us, He will bless us so we can give others.

The Evolution of the Church of God

The Meaning of the Word “Church”:

- The word our Lord Jesus used for church was from the Greek word “Ekklesia” from the Greek verb “eklo” meaning invite.
- It is the same word used for when a gathering of citizens are called out into some place for an assembly.
- In Coptic “Ekklesia” means the place where a group of believers meet to pray.
- The church is the assembly of the believers (from heaven and earth) gathered in the house of God around Jesus’ Body and Blood in the presence of the angels and the saints.
- This is led by the clergy in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ the Head of the church.
- The church went through different phases:
 - One: Adam to Moses;
 - Two: Moses to our Lord Jesus
 - Three (current): Lord Jesus to eternity.

The Evolution of the Church from the First Paradise to the Church of the New Testament:

First Paradise:

- This was the first dwelling of God with man where Adam and Eve had a strong loving relationship with God.
- But it all changed after the fall, and they were kicked out of the paradise and sin made a barrier between them and God.

❖ *Genesis 3:8*

“⁸ And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”

Noah's Ark:

- This was God's plan to save man.
 - It was God Himself who closed the door of the ark and protected it till the end of the flood.
 - Similarly, the church is God's plan for salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ.
- The door on the side of the ark, symbolizes Jesus' side that was stabbed on the cross with the spear.

The Altar:

- After the fall, Man was in a great need to rebuild a relationship with God.
- This could not be done except through the sacrifice.
 - God instituted this concept when He clothed Adam and Eve with tunics of animal's skin.
- From this point the altar started to have a role in re-establishing the relationship between God and man.

❖ *Genesis 8:20-21*

“²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the Lord, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And the Lord smelled a soothing aroma. Then the Lord said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart *is* evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done.”

Bethel:

- It was instituted when Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau.
- The heaven was opened and he saw a ladder going from earth to heaven, he was afraid and said,
 - ❖ *Genesis 28:17*
“¹⁷ “How awesome *is* this place! This *is* none other than the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven!””

The Tabernacle:

- The tabernacle was built according to the design that God showed to Moses, to be the dwelling of God with His people.
 - ❖ *Exodus 25:8*
“⁸ And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.”
- It represents the presence of God with His people, and they took it everywhere they went.

The Temple:

- The temple is considered a continuation of the tabernacle as it has the same sections and same contents.
- The temple moved the people emotionally and made them want to stay in Jerusalem.
- King Solomon said:
 - ❖ *1 Kings 8:12-13*
“¹² The Lord said He would dwell in the dark cloud.
¹³ I have surely built You an exalted house,
And a place for You to dwell in forever.”

The Church of the New Testament:

- The first mention of the church by our Lord Jesus was in the Gospel of St. Matthew when He said to Peter:
 - ❖ *Matthew 16:18*
“¹⁸ And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”
- Church was also mentioned in:
 - ❖ *Matthew 18:15-17*
“¹⁵ Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’¹⁷ And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.”

Elements of the Coptic Church of the New Testament:

The Architecture:

1. Ark:

- The church is often built in the shape of an ark facing the east.
- It represent Noah's ark which saved Noah and his family during the flood.
- The church is the ark that saves us from the flood of this vain world that is full of sins and tribulations and takes us to as safe haven.

2. Cross:

- Sometimes the church is built in the shape of a cross, because it is the place where the sacrament of Eucharist takes place, the Body and Blood of Christ which is shed for our salvation.

3. Circle:

- The church could also be built in the shape of a circle to symbolize the eternal nature of the church – the circle has no beginning and no end.

The Iconostasis:

- Some used to call the iconostasis “the veil of the altar”, but this name is not accepted by the church because the veil of the altar was torn into two through the cross, and the way to the Holy of Holies was opened to all the believers.
- The iconostasis is placed between the altar and the rest of the church.
- It holds many icons of different saints symbolizing the unity between the heavenly (victorious) church and the earthly (struggling) church.
- The cross is placed on top of the iconostasis as a sign that our Lord Jesus Christ opened the gate to heaven through His cross and that the cross is the weapon that gives victory over Satan to all the believers.
- The icon of the last supper is also placed on the iconostasis as a sign that our Lord Jesus Christ is the unseen High Priest who offers for us His Body and His Blood on the altar.
- We also see an ostrich's egg hanging from the iconostasis.
- The ostrich does not know how to protect its eggs, it buries them in the sand thinking they are protected but in reality they are in great danger to be trampled by the feet of big animals.
- But it is God who protects them since ostrich still exists till today.
- So this reminds us that God who was able to protect the ostrich eggs through all these years will also protects us because His eyes are always on us.
- The eggs in the church symbolize the hope in the resurrection.

The Candles:

- Candles represent saints and martyrs, who through their asceticism were the light of the world and our guide on our journey to heaven.
 - *Asceticism (n)*: severe self-discipline and avoidance of all forms of indulgence
- Candles on the altar refer to the angels who appeared in the tomb at the time of resurrection
- There is always a lamp (Kandeel) in the east side of the church that is always lit and refers to the star that appeared to the Magi.
- In the prayer of raising the incense, both the morning and evening, the priest prays holding candles on the cross.
- The lit candles signify that He Who was crucified is the Light of the world, sacrificing Himself to give light to those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death.

❖ 1 Peter 2:9

“⁹ But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;”

- The priest may use three candles (the Holy Trinity) or one candle (the Son’s incarnation and crucifixion).
- The Old Testament was a shadow of the New Testament:

❖ Hebrews 10:1

“¹ For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come,”

- Likewise the New Testament is a shadow or a picture of what is in heaven, therefore, whoever lives in the church will not be a stranger to heaven. God does not change

❖ Hebrews 13:8

“⁸ Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

The Altar:

- The altar in the Coptic Church represents heaven, the dwelling of God with His people and the saints.
- Father Jermanios said: “It is the dwelling of Christ the King of all sitting on His throne with His apostles.”
- In the Old Testament when the people entered the Promised Land, and the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the symbol of the heavens.
- The people committed themselves not to build any altar or to offer their sacrifices outside Jerusalem.
- Otherwise, the person will be cut off God’s people.
- This is how God confirms that heaven and sacrifice are connected; the doors of heaven were opened through the sacrifice of the altar and the Cross was connected to eternal life.
- An altar is the meeting place between the physical and the spiritual. This congruence is apparent in the analogy of:
 - Just as the temple (representing heaven and reconciliation with God) is tied to the altar (representing the Cross of Jesus Christ), therefore our only way to reconciliation of God is through the Cross of His Son Jesus Christ.
- Elements of the altar include:

1. The Doors of the Altar:

- The altar has three doors; the most important is the middle one called “The Royal Door”. Curtains are hung on the doors of the altar to close the doors after the end of the liturgy to keep the holiness of the place.
- Only a priest is allowed to open the curtain of the altar saying: “Lord have mercy on us...”

2. The Eastern Side of the Altar:

- It symbolizing the bosom of the Father that is open of the whole world through the altar and priestly service.
- We pray toward the east because:
 - The lost paradise was in the Garden of Eden by the Euphrates River which was east of Jerusalem
 - Our Lord Jesus the Sun of Righteousness will come from the east
- ❖ *Malachi 4:2*
“² But to you who fear My name
The Sun of Righteousness shall arise
With healing in His wings;
And you shall go out.”
- ❖ *Matthew 24:27*
“²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west,
so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.”

3. The Steps:

- In the east there are 7 steps representing the 7 ranks of priesthood.
- The highest rank being the Bishop it is called the throne and the Patriarch sits on it during his ordination and the priests sit on the steps according to their ranks.
- This represents what came in the Book of Revelation about our Lord Jesus sitting surrounded by 24 priests.
- ❖ *Revelation 4:2-4*
“² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne. ³ And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.”

4. The Altar (the Table of the Lord):

- It is called the Table of the Lord or the Holy Table.
- It is between the priesthood steps and the door of the altar in the middle away from the walls:
 - ❖ *Revelation 9:13*
“¹³ And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God,”
- The altar symbolizes the tomb or the Golgotha where Christ was crucified and offered Himself as a living sacrifice.

The Vessels of the Coptic Church:

1. The Holy Tablet:

- It is a rectangular piece of wood consecrated with the Holy Myron.
- It is engraved with crosses in the corner and in its center.
- A consecrated altar does not need a Holy Tablet, but it is used by itself for sanctification in cases of extreme necessity to replace the altar.
 - Christians used it during the days of persecution to finish the prayer of the liturgy in case the church was attacked.

2. The Paten:

- It is made of gold or silver or any other metal.
- It is flat and round.
- It symbolizes the tomb and the pot of manna.
- It is consecrated with Holy Myron before it is used for the liturgy

3. The Dome:

- It is also called “Asterisk”.
- It consists of two silver arched bands, held by a screw, crossed over each other into the shape of a cross.
- It is put over the paten.
- It represents the shape of the tomb.
- It is also a reminder of the star that appeared to the Wise Men.

❖ *Matthew 2:9-11*

“⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

4. The Seat:

- It is a wooden box placed in the middle of the Altar.
- It is used as a Chalice-Stand.
- Usually it is cubicle in shape with the top closed with high flaps.
- It is decorated with four small icons or more.
- It is called 'the Throne' for it represents the presence of the Crucified Lord

❖ *Isaiah 6:1*

"¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His *robe* filled the temple."

❖ *Revelation 4:2*

"² Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and *One* sat on the throne."

5. The Chalice:

- The Communion Cup which holds the wine that will become the Blood of the Lord Jesus.
- Chalices are made from precious metals: gold and silver .
- The Coptic Chalice has a bell-shaped form; the stem is long and rests on a circular stand.
- Our Lord Jesus himself used a cup.

❖ *Matthew 26:27*

"²⁷ Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave *it* to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you."

- Our teacher St. Paul calls it "the cup of blessing" and "the cup of the Lord"

❖ *1 Corinthians 10:16*

"¹⁶ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?"

❖ *1 Corinthians 10:21*

"²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons."

6. The Spoon:

- The Spoon in Coptic is called "Mytsteer."
- It is used to administer the Blood of Christ during communion.

7. The Book of the Gospel:

- A box covered with silver or gold.
- It contains a copy of the New Testament.

8. The Box of Incense:

- It is used for the incense.
- Incense represents the prayers of the saints.
 - ❖ *Revelation 8:3*
“³ Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne.”
- It was also used in the Old Testament.
 - ❖ *Exodus 30:38*
“³⁸ Whoever makes *any* like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people.”
- There are also prophecies that it will also be used in the New Testament.
 - ❖ *Malachi 1:11*
“¹¹ For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name *shall be* great among the Gentiles; In every place incense *shall be* offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations,” Says the Lord of hosts.”

9. The Candleholders:

- Two candleholders are placed on the altar.

10. The Censer:

- It is used to burn incense.
- It is made of brass or silver.
- The container is suspended on three chains from which it can be swung during the offering of the incense.
- There are 12 bells on a censer to symbolize the 12 apostles.
- The hook and its chain reminds us of Christ’s humility when He came down to earth.
- In our church, the censer symbolizes St. Mary who bore the “True coal burning with Fire”, that is the incarnate Son of God.
- Its three chains remind us of the Holy Trinity who participated in the Incarnation of the Son.
 - The Father sent His Son, the Son obeyed, and the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin for the Incarnation of the Son.
- The upper dome represents heaven.
- The incense represents prayers of the saints.

11. The Ciborium:

- A box made of silver or any metal.
- It is round in shape and has a very firm cover.
- The Sacrament is placed in it to be taken to someone who could not come to church to take communion the same day of the liturgy only.

12. The Eprosferin:

- It is a big cloth embroidered with cross in the middle to cover the chalice and the paten.
- It is called “Eprosferin” because when it is taken off from the altar the deacon says “prosferin” “come to the Lord”
- The purpose of the eprosferin is hiding the bread and wine from the catechumens as they will not leave until the gospel and they are not baptized so they are not allowed to behold the sacrament.
 - Note: A catechumen is a Christian convert under instruction before baptism.

13. The Basin and the Pot:

- Made of copper or silver.
- They are placed on a wooden chair on the side of the altar for the priest to wash his hands during the service

14. The Lamb Basket:

- This is where the lamb is presented
- Made of palms
- Decorated with silk crosses

15. The Musical Instruments:

- Coptic Church uses musical instruments such as the triangle and the cymbals to accompany the Coptic hymns.

Lessons Learned:

- We must enter the church in reverence and humility with proper clothing and cleanliness of the body and spirit. As the bible says:
 - ❖ *Psalm 93:5*
“5 Your testimonies are very sure;
Holiness adorns Your house,
O Lord, forever.”
- And when we enter the church, we worship and bow down before the Holy altar, saying,
 - ❖ *Psalm 5:7*
“7 But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy;
In fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple.”



Personality Development

What is Personality?

- It is a combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character.
- Everything we experience affects the development of our personalities, but some factors may have a more significant impact than others.
- It has been shown that the environment surrounding a person has a significant impact in the development of their personality.

What is an Environment?

- First, let's define environment: all factors that surround and influence a person's personality and behavior except their genetic makeup.
- Therefore, an individual's environment is composed of the following factors:
 - Family and Upbringing
 - Society and Friendships
 - Education and Culture
 - Media
 - Church
- Now, let's walk through each of these factors:

Family and Upbringing:

- **Why Family:** Humans are social beings. When God created man, He did not wish to leave him alone but created Eve to be with him. We live in families and communities because it is in our nature and we seek the company of others as it brings us joy and contentment.
- **Family Impact:** For every human, the family is the first social environment to step into. It affects the individual since childhood and has the greatest impact on the formation of personality, attitudes, and behaviours.
- **Family in the Bible:** Despite the major influence of the family on the individual, the Bible makes mention of a few examples of people who were raised in God-fearing families but did not walk in the way of God. On the other hand, the Bible also makes mention of characters who were brought up in non-believing families but chose to stay on God's paths. Therefore, a person could, with the grace of God, turn things around to counteract any negative aspects of their upbringing.
- **Examples:** Find examples of personalities who were either positively or negatively impacted by their families and were able to change their ways in the Scripture below:

❖ 2 Kings 21:1-2:

"¹Manasseh was **twelve years old** when he became king, and he reigned **fifty-five years** in Jerusalem. His mother's name was **Hephzibah**. ² And he did **evil** in the sight of the **LORD**, according to the abominations of the nations whom the **LORD** had **cast out** before the **children of Israel**."

❖ 2 Kings 21:22-26

"²² He **forsook the LORD** God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the **LORD**.

²³ Then the servants of **Amon** conspired against him, and killed the king in his own house. ²⁴ But the people of the land executed all those who had conspired against King Amon. Then the people of the land made his son **Josiah** king in his place.

²⁵ Now the **rest of the acts of Amon** which he did, *are they not written* in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? ²⁶ And he was buried in his tomb in the **garden of Uzza**. Then Josiah his son **reigned** in his place."

❖ 2 Kings 22:1-2

"¹ Josiah was **eight years old** when he became king, and he reigned **thirty-one years** in Jerusalem. His mother's name was **Jedidah** the daughter of **Adaiah** of **Bozkath**. ² And he did *what was right* in the sight of the **LORD**, and walked in all the ways of his father **David**; he **did not turn aside** to the right hand or to the left."

Society and Friendships:

- **Definition:** According to sociologists, a society is a group of people with common territory, interaction, and culture. Whether we realize it or not, we are all part of societies. Examples of societies or communities include institutional (Church, school), neighbourhood, familial, etc.
- **Influence:** Society shapes the way our identities. This, then influences our different personalities and choices. Nevertheless, since there are two sides to every coin, living in and interacting with a society may have a positive or a negative effect on the personality development of an individual.
- **Challenges:** Swimming against the tide or opposing the majority when needed is a difficult task for the social being, which a human is, to undertake. Unless an individual is equipped with a wise courageous personality coupled with being conscious of the human tendency to follow the mainstream, it will not be easy for one to discern and make the right decision.
- **Example – School:** The school has a significant role in an individual's personality development. After all, it is the first place where a child gets to interact with the outside world and therefore, it shapes the way the child sees themselves and others. A school that instills discipline where rules are enforced and respected, the school brings forth individuals with strong goals who are focused, have self-discipline, and overall successful individuals.
- **Friendship:** a relationship whose impact is often underestimated, considering the tremendous impact it has on our well-being. Long-lasting friendship is something that is frequently overlooked as a positive developmental influence. Similar to a society's impact, friendships may have a positive or a negative effect on the personality development of an individual.

Education and Culture:

- **Purpose:** Throughout history, humans have had a thirst for knowledge, and development. The purpose of all education should be to foster and further the development of a well-balanced personality.
- **The Church's View:** For these reasons, the Church has historically promoted education and the improvement of the mind. Thus, it is not suitable for a good Christian to stop enlightening their minds. Ceasing to learn makes no use of our God-given talents. God wants us to steward those gifts for Him and to use our unique roles in the body of Christ to glorify Him.
- **How:** Education and knowledge equip the individual with effective problem-solving and decision-making skills that would help them face any challenges along their personality development journey.

Media:

- **Definition:** The Internet and other forms of media are now deeply integrated in our daily lives. Being recognized as an important factor, the exposure to media could pose a threat to an individual's behaviour and development, but it also could enable to acquire new and useful skills.
- **How it is special:** Unlike the previously discussed factors, the media has a special glare that takes advantage of an individual's need for constant communication, the ultimate motivation behind the obsession with social media.
- **What to do:** Realizing how significant of an impact media presents, we can take back control of our lives by ensuring that we:
 - Discern and only choose to consume what is appropriate
 - Track and control our time spent consuming it
 - Reflect on the way it molds our behaviours and personalities.

Church:

- **How it is exceptional:** In the life of the Christian, Church plays a major role in the continuous sanctification of the human nature. Church rites of daily prayer, Bible readings, and sacraments have been a great support over the years in the building of the constructive habits of a Christian.
- **What it offers:** The Church provides a healthy environment where youth can ask the guidance of a spiritual father, in a holy ecosystem that is built on the principles the faith of the Apostolic Fathers. Combined, all what the Church has to offer will immensely influence the development of an individual's personality.

How do we overcome factors that we cannot control?

- Despite the great impact the environment has on an individual's personality, a person can overcome the negative consequences of unfortunate circumstances.
- The Bible gives us an example in the life of Joseph who, despite being set up for failure, was able to make the best out the situation and became the second most powerful man in Egypt, next to Pharaoh.
- Joseph's environment offered:
 - Family relationships that were full of hatred and jealousy
 - Living in a morally corrupt society and going through painful experiences
 - Having no friends all his life, but in prison
- Joseph's faith was the only thing that he was able to hold onto. It was his adherence to the faith that caused the Lord to be with him. Despite the injustice and cruelty of his circumstances, he was able to offer love to his siblings who tried to kill him and sold him as a slave.
- All it takes to follow Joseph's example is to decide to be strong and to ask for God's grace to work with you.



Memorization

The Prayer of the 9th Hour

Psalm 110

I will give thanks to You, O Lord, with my whole heart, in the council of the upright, and in their congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, examined are all His wills. Majesty and splendor are His works: and His righteousness endures forever and ever. He has made a remembrance of all His wonders: the Lord is merciful and compassionate. He has given food to those who fear Him: He shall remember His covenant forever. He has declared to His people the power of His works, to give them the inheritance of nations.

The works of His hands are truth and justice: all His commandments are faithful: established forever and ever, made in truth and uprightness. He sent redemption to His people: He commanded His covenant forever: holy and fearful is His name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and understanding is good to all who do according to it. His praise endures forever and ever.

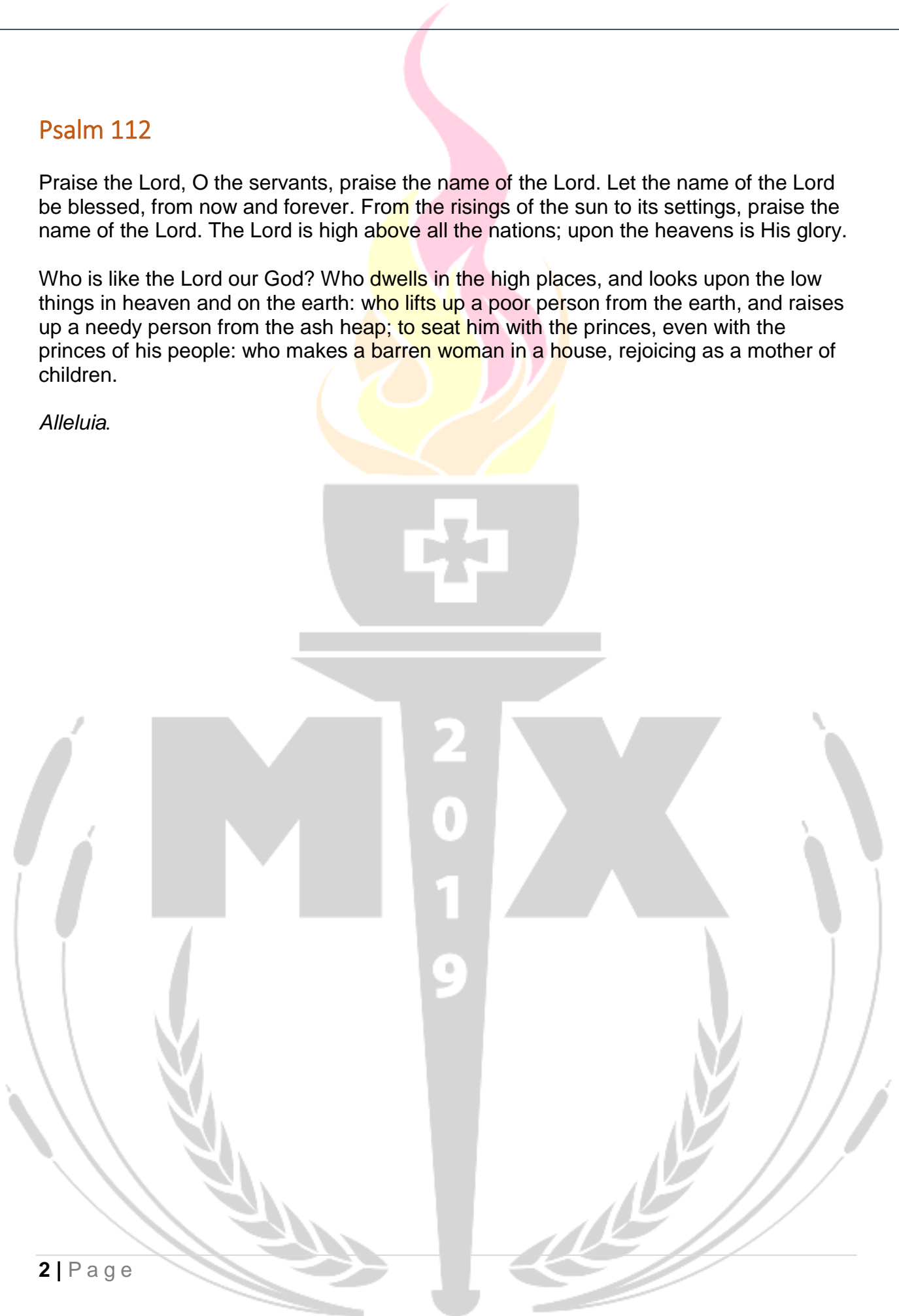
Alleluia.

Psalm 112

Praise the Lord, O the servants, praise the name of the Lord. Let the name of the Lord be blessed, from now and forever. From the risings of the sun to its settings, praise the name of the Lord. The Lord is high above all the nations; upon the heavens is His glory.

Who is like the Lord our God? Who dwells in the high places, and looks upon the low things in heaven and on the earth: who lifts up a poor person from the earth, and raises up a needy person from the ash heap; to seat him with the princes, even with the princes of his people: who makes a barren woman in a house, rejoicing as a mother of children.

Alleluia.



The Holy Gospel According to St. Luke 9:10-17:

And the Apostles, when they had returned, told Him all that they had done. Then He took them, and went aside privately into a deserted place belonging to the city called Bethsaida. And the multitude, when they knew it, followed Him: and He received them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing.

And when the day began to wear away, the twelve came, and said to Him, "Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and lodge, and get provisions: for we are here in a deserted place."

But He said unto them, "You give them to eat." And they said, "We have no more than five loaves and two fish; unless we go and buy food for all these people." For they were about five thousand men. And He said to His disciples, "Make them sit down in groups of fifty." And they did so, and made them all sit down.

Then He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and broke, and gave to the disciples to set before the multitude. And they ate, and were all filled, and twelve baskets of the remaining fragments were taken by them.

Glory be to God forever. Amen.

The Litanies

1. O, Who tasted death in the flesh in the ninth hour for our sake, we the sinners, put to death our carnal lusts, O Christ, our God, and deliver us. Let my supplication draw close before You, O Lord; according to Your word give me understanding. Let my petition come before Your presence; according to Your word revive me.

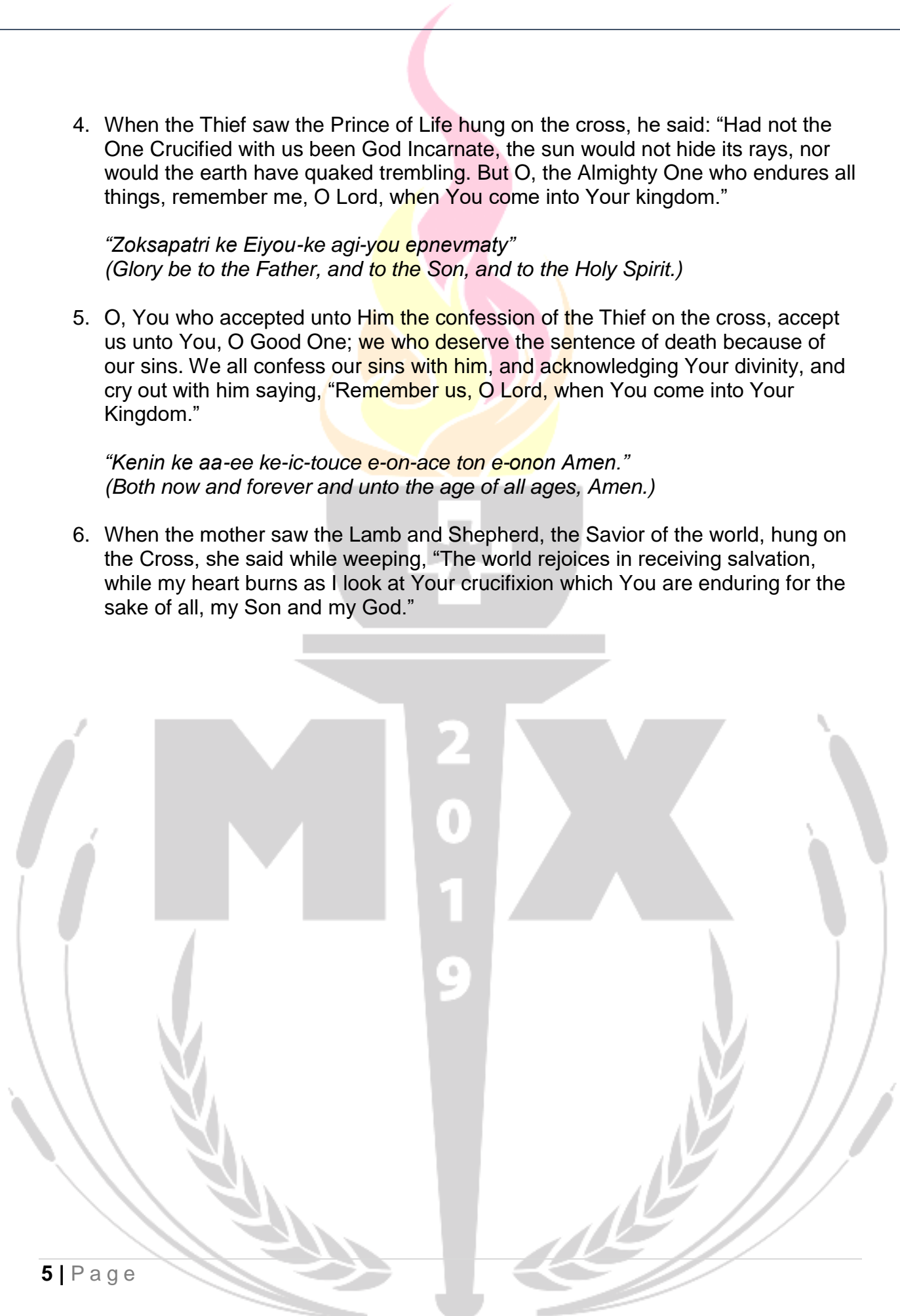
*“Zoksapatri ke Eiyou-ke agi-you epnevmaty”
(Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.)*

2. O You, who commended the spirit into the hands of the Father as You hung on the cross, in the ninth hour, and guided the Thief who was crucified with You into entering the Paradise, do not neglect me, O Good One, nor reject me, I, the lost one; but sanctify my soul and enlighten my understanding, and allow me to be a partaker of the grace of Your life-giving mysteries; that when I taste of Your benevolences, I offer You praise without lukewarmness, longing for Your splendor above all things, O Christ our Lord, and deliver us.

*“Kenin ke aa-ee ke-ic-touce e-on-ace ton e-onon Amen.”
(Both now and forever and unto the age of all ages, Amen.)*

3. O, You who was born of the Virgin for our sake, and endured crucifixion, O Good One, and abolished death by Your death, and manifested resurrection by Your resurrection, O God, do not turn away from those whom You have created with Your own hands, but manifest, O Good One, Your love for mankind. Accept from Your mother an intercession on our behalf. Deliver, O Savior, a humble people. Do not leave us to the end, and do not forsake us forever. Do not break Your covenant, and do not take away from us your mercy, for the sake of Abraham, Your beloved, Isaac, Your servant, and Israel, Your saint.

*“Kenin ke aa-ee ke-ic-touce e-on-ace ton e-onon Amen.”
(Both now and forever and unto the age of all ages, Amen.)*

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4. When the Thief saw the Prince of Life hung on the cross, he said: “Had not the One Crucified with us been God Incarnate, the sun would not hide its rays, nor would the earth have quaked trembling. But O, the Almighty One who endures all things, remember me, O Lord, when You come into Your kingdom.”

“Zoksapatri ke Eiyou-ke agi-you epnevmaty”

(Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.)

5. O, You who accepted unto Him the confession of the Thief on the cross, accept us unto You, O Good One; we who deserve the sentence of death because of our sins. We all confess our sins with him, and acknowledging Your divinity, and cry out with him saying, “Remember us, O Lord, when You come into Your Kingdom.”

“Kenin ke aa-ee ke-ic-touce e-on-ace ton e-onon Amen.”

(Both now and forever and unto the age of all ages, Amen.)

6. When the mother saw the Lamb and Shepherd, the Savior of the world, hung on the Cross, she said while weeping, “The world rejoices in receiving salvation, while my heart burns as I look at Your crucifixion which You are enduring for the sake of all, my Son and my God.”



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