

O Lord and Master of my life...

The “Prayer of St Ephrem” is ubiquitous during Great Lent, and is used in all weekday services, and in prayers at home.

This prayer is much like the “Our Father”, in the following way. When the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, He told them to “pray in this way”, and then recited the “Our Father”, thus giving us a model for how to pray and a prayer which perfectly fulfilled these principles. So should we treat the prayer of St Ephrem. Its content is truly sublime, and teaches us the right way to approach God in prayer, how to think of ourselves, and what to ask for. It also is a perfect prayer fulfilling these principles.

Everyone should say this prayer daily during the week in Great Lent. Because of the physical way in which we say this prayer (it is done with bows and prostrations), it has the remarkable ability to put the soul in the right frame of mind. One might even go so far to say that if the Prayer of St Ephrem has been prayed with attention at least once during the day, and nothing else has been done, the Christian has prayed well.

The reality of our scattered, busy, distracted and often lazy lives is that we do not pray often enough, or with enough attention, or in the proper frame of mind. If a person is consistent in praying the prayer of St Ephrem, no matter how well he does in other prayer and spiritual reading, he has a “life line” and is grounded in the most important aspects of the way a Christian should conduct himself during Lent.

Of course, to just pray the prayer of St Ephrem is NOT enough for a Christian, but a pastor must prescribe “baby steps for baby feet” We all are in some measure “babies”, and all of us should pray this prayer, attentively, and carefully, without fail. The person who takes this advice to “come and see” will soon find the fruit of this practice.

The prayer of St Ephrem is found in any complete Orthodox prayer book. For instance, the “Jordanville prayer book” has this prayer in its Triodion section (page 166 in the latest printing). [Our website](#) has it in English and Slavonic with 4 sections per page so it can be printed, cut in quarters and inserted in a prayer book, in [RTF](#) and [PDF](#) formats. It is part of a dedicated page containing information about our [Theology, Homilies, Services, and other Resources about Great Lent.](#)

Other resources for this prayer include a [catechetical talk about the prayer of St Ephrem.](#)

Like anything worth doing, the prayer of St Ephrem takes some practice before we can receive the full benefit. There are bows AND prostrations during the prayer, and a certain number of repetitions. To someone who is accustomed to this prayer, the physical

actions and specific repetitions free the mind and penetrate the soul. This can only be understood if it is done, else, a person will consider the prayer to be too complicated, or worse, an example of “vain repetition”, which the scripture forbids. He who has ears to hear, and mouth to speak, arms to make the sign of the cross, and knees to bend, let him understand!

The prayer of St Ephrem is said two different ways in church. The best way to say it at home is the “longer” way, twice a day, in morning and evening prayers. If a person only prays in the morning, than once. If both times, then twice. If a person is not organized or motivated enough to say formal morning or evening prayers, at least this prayer can be said. As my father used to say, Once or twice, but never “nunce”!

This is the “long way”.

The prayer is said two times, one time in parts, and the last time in full. After each part, or the entire prayer, a prostration is made. In between the two “O God cleanse me a sinner” is said twelve times, with a bow each time. This is easy to remember after doing it a few times. Two prayers, four prostrations, twelve bows (and 100 calories burned).

“O Lord and Master of my life, a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talking give me not.”

Prostration¹.

“But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience, and love bestow upon me Thy servant.”

Prostration.

“Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my failings and not condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

Prostration.

Then, twelve repetitions of:

“O God, cleanse me a sinner.”

Bow.

And then repeat the entire prayer all at once:

“O Lord and Master of my life, a spirit of idleness, despondency, ambition, and idle talking give me not. But rather a spirit of chastity, humble-mindedness, patience, and love bestow upon me Thy servant. Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my failings and not condemn my brother; for blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

Prostration.

A Prostration is a full bow to the ground with the knees touching the ground, and the head touching or near the ground, then immediately standing back up. As the bow to the ground is begun, the sign of the cross is made. Some people touch their knees to the ground first and then bend their upper body down, and the more athletic or coordinated essentially “fall” forward to the ground with their knees and hands touching at essentially the same time. This is very similar to the familiar gym class “burpee”.

A Bow, also known as a “reverence” or “Poklon” is when the sign of the cross is made, while simultaneously bowing the head by bending at the waist. Some bow deeply and touch the ground with their right hand, and other make very shallow bows. It really does not matter as long as the movement is done with attention.

Something NOT TO DO: No “waving at the air”. Some do prostrations and bows quickly or carelessly, and the sign of the cross they make looks like they are shooing away a fly. “Let all things be done in good order”.

The author has many fond memories of saying this prayer way back when, when a layman, especially in church, or with his children. The church would be dark, and lit only by candles, the priest standing in front of the royal doors. It would be very quiet, and only his voice and “swishing” sounds from the prostrations or bows would be heard. Everybody would be doing the same thing at once; this was always a profoundly holy moment and I remember thinking sometimes that I wish I would always be in this state of mind. There was a feeling that something profoundly good and important was happening. A mixture of sorrow for my personal condition and great hope in God that I really would get better sometime, would flood my soul. Many times I would even feel warmth. With the sublime, was always mixed “real life” – sounds of grunts, heavy breathing, the sights of children making very creative prostrations. When I had to say the Trisagion prayers immediately after, I would sometimes struggle to say them without betraying that I was out of breath!

Parents: say this prayer with your children! I know, it is sometimes a “circus”, but where are they going to learn piety is not from you. Prayer is not always neat and pretty with

children, but you will be glad you went to the trouble.

In another post, we will look at some of the profound theology in this prayer.

Here is the most important “take home” point: **SAY THIS PRAYER EVERY WEEKDAY IN GREAT LENT!**

This document is available at <http://www.orthodox.net/greatlent/o-lord-and-master-of-my-life-prayer-of-st-ephrem-01.html>. It is also in [DOC](#) or [PDF](#) format.