



Saint Gabriel's Interpretation of the 50th Psalm and the Parable of the Ten Virgins

~ By archimandrite Kyrion (Oniani) ~

Here I would like to offer one of my recollections, which clearly reveals the measure of his love and the height of his spiritual stature.

In the morning, as soon as I woke up, I thought about Father Gabriel and decided to go see him.

Entering the Samtavro Monastery, I prayed in the small church in honor of Saint Nino and also in the large katholikon¹ of the monastery, after which I headed to Father Gabriel's cell. I went up the stairs which led to the elder's cell and to the nuns' living quarters. Both doors of the cell were open, and inside the doors on a low chair sat Mother Paraskeva who smiled as she looked at me. Just as I was about to open my mouth to ask for the blessing to enter, Mother Paraskeva proceeded ahead of me and informed Father Gabriel about my arrival. Then she told me to stand outside the door.

“Come in, what are you looking for?”

I didn't hesitate, but entered inside. I was holding a small bag full of various foods in my hands. Almost every visitor brought such gifts for the elder with great joy, and this was out of the greatness of their love for Father Gabriel. For they all understood what a great treasure he was in their lives. As for Father Gabriel, he was a truly generous host. He wholeheartedly received each visitor with blessings and with a meal that usually he himself prepared, or which was prepared by those devoted to him. It was seldom that a visitor who came two, three or four times would not be treated to such a meal. Actually, it was just as rare for a visitor who came a single time to not be treated to something - at least a little something from the blessed elder's table. When he received someone, he pleaded with them to sit down to eat in such a way that despite their being satiated, they could not help but to have a taste so that they may set the elder's heart at ease. Whether the guest had much or little, the elder would rejoice as a small child because his guest had eaten from his table and would be full.

I will now continue with what I have to tell. I gave my bag to Mother Paraskeva and while I approached Father Gabriel, I bowed in prostration and said to him, "Bless, Father." He blessed me with his usual seriousness from deep within and motioned for me to sit down on a nearby chair. I would like here to move away from the subject of my narrative and say a few words about the prayers and blessings of Father Gabriel. Never, since the time I met Father Gabriel, do I recall the elder ever hurriedly praying or giving a blessing, even if many were waiting for him to bless them. I am not saying that the elder left people to wait for a long time or that by his fervent prayer he sought to create the impression of this phenomenon. Father Gabriel never did anything artificially, as if he sought to make some impression on anyone. Surely this was not the matter. His inner grace and power were revealed naturally and openly, and not according to the elder's effort, nor by any ostensible attempts to make an exhibition of himself. Rather, he did things naturally and in an ordinary way with simplicity, and despite his great efforts to hide his gifts, they could not be concealed. It was impossible for the unity Father Gabriel had with God to be hidden. In order to explain more clearly what is written here, I will try to further explain my thoughts on this subject. I wonder, is there anything more secret, more utterly hidden than the Holy Spirit? Is there anything which is so impossible to behold, not only for men but the holy angels as well? The same could be said concerning His servant, the great elder, who had complete unity with the Lord - something which will be discussed below. This story will show that the elder acquired unity with the Lord in his earthly life, and eternal perfection in the next.

Naturally, of course, the elder knew which blessing or advice to give to each person, according to their needs. He did not feign or pretend but had a keen gift, not merely in particular moments or circumstances, but all the time. He always said that which was necessary to say to someone. Sometimes he simply blessed; other times he warned of an impending trial - something which was interfering with one's spiritual progress or formation of soul. Father Gabriel had no need to be informed in any way, nor did he need to hear a confession or have a conversation about a particular subject with a visitor. He keenly perceived everything, and spoke to a person after having met for the first time as if he had long known them, and he spoke with great depth of meaning on whichever subject, and spoke exhaustively.

As soon as about ten minutes passed since I sat near him, Father Gabriel turned to Mother Paraskeva saying, "go get some rest, and if I need anything I'll call you." Mother Paraskeva did not wait long, and after sitting for a few minutes, with the permission of Father Gabriel, went to her cell. After Mother Paraskeva left, some moments of silence passed and Father Gabriel looked at me and asked, "would you like to discuss a spiritual subject today, my dear?" I agreed with the elder smiling, but at the same time I was a bit perplexed, because I did not consider myself worthy to discuss spiritual matters with Father Gabriel. I was sitting impatiently, waiting to see what the blessed elder would do. He arose from the couch and adjusted the mantle which covered him. Then he lit some incense and sat on a stool. After a short silence, he asked with his kind demeanor, "well my dear, tell me, if you can, which psalm you love most." This question puzzled me, and I did not know how to reply because I did not have any particular favorite psalm. But since I had to give an answer, I mentioned the well-known 50th Psalm², which I recited more often than others, and to some extent, liked more than other psalms.

“Oh, so you like ‘Have mercy on me...’ This psalm really stands out amidst the other psalms. So, if you like it, then of course you must know its meaning. If you can, tell me what you think is meant by ‘Thou hast revealed to me the hidden and secret things of Thy wisdom’.”³

From the very beginning I realized that I could not give a sufficient answer, but because Father Gabriel said, “so if you like it, then of course you know its meaning,” I was ashamed to say directly that I did not know, and therefore I decided to try to produce an answer. I realized that I was suffering in vain, and as time passed I grew uncomfortable as I hesitated to answer. I gathered my strength and said, “I don’t know Father.” Not seeming to notice anything, he smiled at me with his loving smile, which gave me a chance to breathe freely. This assured me that he understood that my response was due to infirmity and not from a desire to deceive.

“Alright, my dear, if you can not say, then I will explain the meaning of the words, ‘Thou hast revealed to me the hidden and secret things of Thy wisdom’. First, let’s begin with the hidden, which King David rightly and wisely mentions before the word secret, and which by virtue of its meaning declares the wonder of God’s wisdom. Hidden means the invisible spiritual world that the Good and All-Powerful Lord created according to His providence and incomprehensible wisdom and established before the creation of the visible world and man. Both of these worlds in their unity comprise the fullness of God’s creation, and man is the perfect embodiment of its fullness. God, by His inconceivable wisdom, united the two natures in one person, the human being: the higher spiritual nature and the physical nature, which in comparison with the spiritual is lower.

Before the Fall, Adam freely saw both the physical and spiritual worlds. Of these, the wisdom and majesty of God were more greatly manifested and beheld in the vision of the Lord’s heavenly abodes: the spiritual world. Adam saw it before the Fall, and afterward, this vision was hidden from him and from all mankind and became the hidden. It was given to us for contemplation, but it was taken away. Sin, disobedience, and transgressing the word of God deprived us of this divine vision. But by the grace of God this vision was again granted to those worthy of it on account of their especial holiness and virtuous life. You see, my dear, holiness is necessary for a person to once again be granted the vision of that which is hidden (the spiritual world), a vision which since the Fall has been taken away and withheld from us. It is a marvelous inheritance by which we may contemplate and experience the wisdom of God. I think that’s enough concerning the hidden, if that was understandable my dear...”

“Yes, I understand everything father,” I answered.

“Then let us say a few words about the more interesting thing referred to as secret. That which is secret is the bosom of secret knowledge of God’s wisdom, which is revealed to people exclusively by the mercy and providence of God. It is revealed to those who constantly and gradually, according to their strength and with the assistance and aid of the Holy Spirit, are growing closer to the higher mysteries of God, and having learned the mysteries are becoming wiser in the knowledge of God, angels and man. It is one thing to

see and to hear; it is entirely another thing to deeply understand the mystery of what one has seen and heard. That which is secret is not comprehended the same way as the hidden. For perception of the hidden is to see and hear while contemplation of the secret is to grasp the mystery of what has been seen and heard. The secret is not perceived in like manner as the hidden. This is because the secret can only be beheld noetically, by the guiding action of the Holy Spirit. In order for the gates revealing the knowledge of the secret to open, a person needs not only holiness, but also merit before God. A person acquires merit by enduring many small and large tribulations, trials, persecution, injustice, ridicule, condemnation, toil, sweat and striving... enduring all with love and humility for the sake of the Lord and His Holy Gospel. A holy life before God, as we have already said, grants a person the vision of the hidden, and if merit is combined with a holy life, the secret is also revealed. That is why I said in the beginning of our conversation that King David justly and wisely mentioned the hidden prior to the secret. For with struggle a man first reaches the fringe or brink of holiness, and by ascending to higher stages he is granted the vision of the hidden. If remaining in diligent struggle he gains favor in the sight of the merciful and philanthropic God, he will receive from Him as a gift the knowledge of the secret.

The man who is immersed in the knowledge of the secret is given revelations according to his capacity. Then he devotes himself to this contemplation with all his might, bearing in mind almost nothing, even the most natural needs, since this state is so delightful for him. He strives to observe with all of his ability, and that which he sees with his nous is carefully discerned for knowledge. In this seemingly tense condition, the person is neither tired nor troubled, but is clad in great patience. This is because his soul is in a state of great peace as it awaits revelation of the secret. Such contemplation for him is a great delight, while the revelation and comprehension of what he sees is inexplicable joy and bliss. All this, my dear, is granted to a man who has attained to the highest virtues, which according to Saint John of the Ladder are faith, hope and love. Indeed, these are the highest virtues, as I have mentioned, for these form the last rung on the ladder of virtues.

And yet, even though a person experiences this highest bliss, he is still not completely sated and does not cease to seek from God this grace and a deeper union and inseparable existence with Him. Then comes theosis, which is impossible to reach by any other means. Theosis is solely a gift from God... something incomprehensible and inexpressible, which the Lord grants as a gift of the Life-Giving Spirit upon the person worthy of the gifts of the Spirit. What is required of man is toil and struggle. In this situation, a man devotes himself to humility, mercilessly humbling himself and descending to the very depths of an awareness of his own infirmity. He continually weeps, cries out and prays to God, begging that He will grant him an inseparable life with Him, his Creator. Then a flame of love is lighted within the man... a flame of fire fed from the supreme fire, the eternal one which is called Love.⁴ The man desires unity with this fire, yet not as a flame somehow distinct or in any way separated from the eternal fire. The desired complete unity with the eternal fire is theosis. To attain theosis, a man must renounce and forget himself, and such a feat is accomplished through supplication and internal austerity with oneself. He must love every person, seeing every person as a brother and companion. He must bear in mind that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for us all. To love all means to serve all with wisdom... a wisdom which the Lord gives to everyone on whom He looks and envelops with His all-perfect love. Before being united with God, man finds himself in agony, struggling and seeking to remain permanently with the

Lord. When this unity is achieved man experiences a love marked by tranquility, peace and rest. Before union with God, a person struggles with all his being and seeks an inseparable coexistence with God. But union with God is a state of love, great serenity, peace and repose. Before union with God, a man's existence consists of toil and longing, as it lacks completeness and perfection; after union, he feels great tranquility, peace and repose since such a man is immersed in the fullness of divine experience.

Saint John's Ladder of Divine Ascent details the ascent of man's soul, and everything written in it is wonderful and divine. However, it is missing a final rung, which is the crown and perfection of them all, and this rung is called Love and Theosis. Here is only love, love, and nothing more. Man is wholly and inseparably united with God. This is a perfected and complete unity. The mind stops, thoughts completely disappear from his mind, as he does not think of anything anymore. He only contemplates God, and does and says only that which he sees and hears from God. Such a man possesses wisdom from the beginning to the end of the age. It is not our business to know who has attained to this state⁵, but we do know of one for sure - Saint John the Theologian."

I was astonished at what he said, since it all seemed incomprehensible to me. I would have thought that I had mistaken something if I had not heard such a wondrous exposition from the mouth of Father Gabriel. In confusion, I thought to myself: how can this be - the mind stops, thoughts disappear... this is impossible. Unable to withstand the uncertainty, when the elder became silent I asked, "Forgive me, Father, what does it mean - the mind stops, thoughts completely disappear from his mind, as he does not think of anything anymore?" He replied, "Yes. Believe me, my dear, what is impossible for man is possible for God. The sure action of the Holy Spirit, with respect to man, is theosis, which is the bestowing of the highest divine crown of all virtues - love. What sort of union with God could there be if the mind is active or when thoughts remain with you and your mind is held captive by some thought? Complete union with God is impossible without the inaction of the mind, and total absence of thoughts. Otherwise, there would be no theosis. Rather, this would amount to the top rung on the ladder, which Saint John of the Ladder refers to as faith, hope and love."

Here occurred a great miracle which I did not comprehend during the time I was with Father Gabriel in his cell. During our conversation, I accepted everything as something usual and ordinary. The loftiness of the elder's discourse was concealed in his humility and simplicity. It was only after I left his cell that I comprehended the profundity and depth of his teachings.

"Love cannot be attained to unless the mind stops and is free of thoughts... behold, it is as I am..." and then the elder softly struck his head with his fingers two or three times. "It is impossible according to your own ability, but it is possible only with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit acts upon a man and makes such a miracle possible. Only, I am not worthy of such grace... it is because of my old age that I cannot keep thoughts and my mind is idle."

Then all of a sudden, it seemed to me that when Father Gabriel said those wondrous words: "behold, it is as I am," I felt a certain satisfaction, as if something was revealed to me... and I had no desire to ask him anything. What was so strange is that what was hard for me to

understand was revealed to me with the strikes of his hand upon his head. It was as if Father Gabriel's gesture induced what I would perceive in my mind. Something which had seemed incomprehensible suddenly seemed all so plausible. Now I could understand a bit of what he had told me.

“One who has attained to theosis, my dear, lives not for himself, but only for the benefit of others. With great humility he hides himself from people, so as not to burn them. For if people saw that he possessed such a gift, they would not rightly understand it, and they would be consumed by envy. Or perhaps it would happen that they would not even be envious since such a phenomenon so far exceeds the power of their understanding. The fact that love is actually the crown of perfection as the final rung of the ladder and that neither this nor theosis is mentioned by Saint John of the Ladder, nor were these things mentioned by anyone thereafter, is according to God's providence. God has reserved this for me to say, and no one else could say it except me.

Love is also the final and perfect interpretation of the Parable of the Ten Virgins. The five foolish virgins in this parable lacked love. This is the main meaning of the parable, and the reason for which they lost the salvation of their souls. The past interpretations of this parable were according to God's providence and were necessary and were given in due time. But God reserved this interpretation for the last times, so as to offer us the greatest, most vital message at a time more necessary than ever before. And God gave it to me, the sinner. For who else other than I, Gabriel, was it necessary to say this? I have spent my whole life in the feat of love for God and humanity, never sparing myself of torments to this end. And what if God has bestowed such grace upon me that I receive the gift of this word in order to declare to all that what God demands of us today is love. With all our strength we must strive to acquire this virtue - love of God and neighbor!”

Father Gabriel said this all to me with great humility, which was evident above all. However, all that he said made such a great impression and at the same time sounded like something powerful and majestic.

“In the beginning, Saint John Chrysostom interpreted the Parable of the Ten Virgins as a lesson on good works. The world in his time had a need for such an interpretation concerning what the foolish virgins lacked. For at that time God wanted good works from the people, and thus he sought good works and toils from them. Later Saint Seraphim of Sarov interpreted this parable, giving it a new meaning. He taught that what the five foolish virgins lacked was the grace of the Holy Spirit. By this, God called upon man to acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit. Since they had such a need then, the Lord blessed believers to direct their struggle in such a way so as to acquire the grace of the Holy Spirit. At that time God demanded this of a man, and this is what was sought from him upon his departure from this world.

However, now that the last times have come, and because of the abounding lawlessness and the love of many growing cold⁶, mankind needs love more than ever and must be wise in order not to lose heart and fall away from it. For today the enemy of the human race is striving by all means to eradicate love from the heart of man, and to gradually diminish the love therein until man is left cold, completely cut off from love's life-giving action. God is now seeking love from us! Therefore, all our efforts should be directed to acquiring it in our

hearts, which is possible only through good works. For love without works is dead... merely an empty word which may condemn a person at the Last Judgment, since a man found without love in his heart only said 'love... love', while he himself was far from doing those things which he ought to have done before the Lord and fellow man. He may even be condemned if he had done some semblance of charitable works, but not in full measure according to his strength, thus failing to do what was possible for him. Love is alive, my dear, but it dies without good works. Good works are the life force of love. This is true love and it is the only power with which a person can resist the temptations, hardship and horror of the last times during the temporary domination of the Antichrist over the world."

Then Father Gabriel looked at me with his usual cheerful look after he finished speaking. We sat quietly for a while in silence, when suddenly the next visitor called out: "Through the prayers of our holy fathers ..." Father Gabriel answered "Amen," allowing the visitor to enter his cell. He blessed me with a smile and said, "Well, my dear, go in peace, in the name of Christ." After receiving his blessing, I left his cell and returned to my home.

It is very difficult to express how joyful I was for all that happened, and I was amazed that Father Gabriel found me worthy to share such a remarkable discourse with me. I was delighted by the gracious words of the elder. For every word of his, even the most ordinary, had such deep meaning and sounded so extraordinary and sweet. His words brought me great joy, peace, and most importantly a great feeling of love and vitality. As I contemplated what he said, a certain beauty, brilliance and silence enveloped me. My mind became clear and free as I considered what Father Gabriel had told me, and I slowly began to understand the profound meaning of his words, which I did not understand while in his cell. My inability to grasp these things when he spoke to me, as I said before, was due to his wondrous simplicity and amazing humility. I was even more greatly astonished as I recalled Father Gabriel's words concerning theosis, and I realized that the elder had spoken of theosis based on his own experience of it. It made a deep impression on me when he said, "behold, it is as I am," and softly struck his head two or three times with his fingers. The elder had to do this since he saw my complete ignorance of the things which he spoke of, and in doing this he made clear something which had been totally incomprehensible to me. Thereafter, I began to grasp the things he had spoken of, but not with full understanding. This experience, to me, was the fruit of the elder's divinization.

Also, I was astonished by his teaching concerning the Ladder of Divine Ascent, which the Church has inherited from Saint John of the Ladder... that the last rung of the ladder is more than simply a rung, but the "crown of all." Father Gabriel said that this crown of all virtues, love, is what is needed to attain theosis. Father Gabriel declared that God reserved it for him to reveal these things, and that no one else could say it except him. The elder spoke of these things in such a way that he hid the distress, anxiety, and the sadness in his heart, which was a result of the fact that no one had yet declared these things. The most important subject I feel he spoke of was the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of which lost their salvation, according to Father Gabriel, because of their lack of love. This he said, was the final interpretation of the parable, which for us is the call and demand of God that we struggle with all of our strength to acquire love.

This demand of love is something that has been reserved by the Lord for these difficult

times, as today it is most urgently needed as never before, even since the entry of our Savior Jesus Christ into the history of mankind. Full of joy from the experience of this discourse by the elder, I had a strong desire to immediately meet with friends. On my way back to Tbilisi, I did not go directly to my house, but visited a close friend's family who knew Father Gabriel well. They were delighted by all that I shared with them, and spent a few hours talking about the elder and things related to what he had told me.

It was already late by the time I returned home. Soon my older brother, who too knew Father Gabriel, returned home from work. I told my brother all about what the elder had told me. Later that evening I had the desire to revisit a translation of the New Testament which was produced by the Stockholm Institute for Bible Translation. I had purchased this New Testament some time ago, but it laid untouched, as I heard about its many mistakes and its inaccurate translation. For this reason, I never had the desire to read it.

I got up, took out the New Testament from the drawer in which I kept it, and by chance opened it to the very beginning of the Gospel of Saint John, which reads In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God⁷. As I read further, I became increasingly convinced that the rumors about the Stockholm edition were not quite accurate. With that said, it in no way compares to the translation of the New Testament into Old Georgian. I eventually began reading some of the other chapters which follow the four books of the Gospel. I soon reached the Book of Revelation, which begins thus: The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place⁸. As I read on, I recalled the words of Father Gabriel: "It is not our business to know who has attained to this state, but we do know of one for sure - Saint John the Theologian." The opening verse of the Book of Revelation seemed like an extraordinary affirmation of the elder's words. This was like a small miracle for me... one which convinced me that everything Father Gabriel told me was absolutely true. It was as if the proof was the New Testament itself, which, as it is inspired by God, confirmed the truth of the elder's discourse.

It is difficult to express the state of my soul as I set out to write this account of the elder. I declare before the Lord that the thought of writing this story was not the fruit of pride. Rather such an idea evoked in me feelings of unworthiness, and this was all more the reason to write this.

Thanks to God I was able to understand, at least in part, what Father Gabriel explained to me, and that he himself had attained theosis... that I was able to comprehend what theosis is and how one may reach it... that love and only love, the crown of all virtues, is theosis, which God imparts as a gift to those who have ascended to the final rung of Saint John's Ladder of Divine Ascent - faith, hope, and love. That God reserved such a revelation for Father Gabriel is matter of wondrous providence.

It is also worth again mentioning Father Gabriel's interpretation of the Parable of the Ten Virgins, which teaches us that the five foolish virgins' downfall was that they lacked love. This is the final interpretation of this parable given by the Lord. Each interpretation of this parable was given to humanity at appropriate stages in history, and they encompassed and revealed the deepest and incomprehensible things of God's providence in the destiny of mankind. This attests that the teachings of the incarnate Logos, our Lord Jesus Christ, have

been declared to all in every period of history.

This final interpretation of the parable teaches that those who will live near the end of time are mandated by God to seek and gain love, because in it consists the only power which may save from the madness of the Antichrist's spirit, from the temptations of that time, and from the bondage which will occur during the Antichrist's terrible domination of the world.

Contemplation of all which is written here led me to think that it was necessary to write what I had heard. It was this sense of responsibility which led me to write this account despite the fact that I was afraid of being the one entrusted with the task of writing it. I was fearful before God when I finally made the decision to give an account of these things. I thought to myself, "what if you forget all that you heard? Were these things meant for you alone? Are you not afraid of answering to Christ for failing to act?" Moreover, I would feel shame before Father Gabriel, that heavenly elder, if I were to forget his precious discussion and teaching.

Writing this story was not easy for me, as it was a long, difficult and complex process that took about four years of inner struggle, as I desired to express these things in such a way so as not to bore readers. And finally, I became determined to publish Father Gabriel's wondrous discourse. May Father Gabriel and readers forgive me if I have failed to express something correctly and understandably. Glory to God. Amen!

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1. A katholikon is the primary church of an Orthodox monastery. ↩
 2. The Orthodox Church primarily uses the Greek version of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (also known as the LXX) rather than translations from the Hebrew editions. The numbering of the Psalms in the Septuagint differs from that found in translations based on the Hebrew editions. Psalm 50 in the Septuagint is Psalm 51 in the Hebrew edition. ↩
 3. Ps 50:8 ↩
 4. The Greek and Russian translations of this text speak of the relationship of an individual flame and the fire of which it is a part as $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\ \gamma\lambda\omega\sigma\sigma\alpha\ \phi\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ & язык огня or 'a tongue of fire', which implies a direct and complete unity. I purposely did not translate this directly to English since this terminology may be unusual to many English speakers and may cause some readers to confuse this with the phenomenon of the 'tongues of fire' mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles - translator's note. ↩
 5. This of course the elder said for me - author's note. ↩
 6. Mt 24:12 ↩
 7. Jn 1:1 ↩
 8. Rv 1:1 ↩

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