

## An Introduction to “Compline” August 27, 2023

### The History and Background of Compline

“Prayer at the Close of Day” is a version of the historic rite called Compline. It is the final service of the day before one retires for the night. The congregation gathers quietly. Preservice music is often omitted, and lighting may be subdued. This is a time for prayer and meditation. The believer finds peace in God’s forgiveness and security under the shadow of his wings. (*Adapted from Christian Worship: Occasional Services ©2004, p. 110*)

The early Christians continued to observe some of the prayer times of their counterparts in the Old Testament. The third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day were set aside as hours of prayer. In the 4<sup>th</sup> cent., when Christianity was recognized by the state, public services began to be held at times corresponding to the hours set aside for private prayer. In some areas, daily congregational services were standard.

Monastic communities increased the number of these prayer hours and elaborated on their forms. They developed a series of seven hours (eight services) known as the *canonical hours*. Recitation of the Psalms was the heart of these services. Everything else in the service was developed to clothe the Psalms.

The canonical services spread from the religious communities to cathedrals and university chapels where groups of clergy assembled for worship. The services, scheduled mostly for the monks and clergy, became known as the *Divine Office*. The laity (non-clergy) occasionally attended morning and evening hours of worship. Those services, accordingly, became more embellished and complex.

Martin Luther approved the use of *Matins (Morning Praise)*, *Vespers (Evening Prayer)*, and *Compline (Prayer at the Close of Day)*, as containing nothing but the words of Scripture. The orders of service, however, remained chiefly in the schools, with large portions still being sung in Latin. They were almost lost through lack of general use. (*Adapted from Christian Worship: Manual ©1993, p. 198*)

Like its Daily Office counterparts, the late-evening service of Compline begins with prayerful responses. The minister begins with a short prayer for the close of day, “The Lord Almighty grant us a quiet night and peace at the last,” followed by Psalm 92:1-2 – <sup>1</sup>*It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High,* <sup>2</sup>*proclaiming your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night.*

The hymn “Before the Ending of the Day” (CW790) has a long-standing association with Compline and is suggested as the first hymn in the service, though other evening hymns are also appropriate. The simple, prayerful text and chantlike melody ask for God’s grace and peace as we fall asleep after another day. The hymn is followed by a confession of sins; we find peace with God by acknowledging our sins of the past day and hearing his unconditional pardon again.

Compline makes use of the psalms just as the other Daily Office services do. A sixth-century document shows that Psalms 4, 91, and 134 were associated with Compline. Other psalms may also be said or sung. As in Evening Prayer, a time for silent meditation and prayer follows each psalm, concluding with a psalm prayer spoken by the minister.

A Scripture reading follows the psalms in all Daily Office services. The nature of Compline is such that a short Scripture reading is appropriate, although the occasion that the service is used for may call for something longer. Bible readings associated with Compline include Isaiah 61:1-3; Jeremiah 14:7-9; Matthew 11:28-30; John 14:27; Romans 8:38-39; Hebrews 13:20-21; and 1 Peter 5:6-9.

The reading is followed by a short set of responsive Bible verses that are appropriately called the Responsory. Psalm 31:5, a psalm that Jesus quoted in Luke 23:46 just before he gave up his life on the cross, is the main verse of the Responsory: “Into your hands I commend by spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.” Worshipers’ thoughts are directed to the truth that our souls and our lives are in the hands of a gracious God whether we fall asleep at the end of the day or we fall asleep in death. After an optional brief devotion and additional hymn, Compline closes with a series of prayers, many of which are quotations from Scripture. The first set of responsive prayers is drawn from Psalm 17:1, 8, 15. –

<sup>1</sup> Hear me, Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry. Hear my prayer—it does not rise from deceitful lips. <sup>8</sup> Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings <sup>15</sup> As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

One or more of several possible short prayers follow; these brief prayers come from a variety of sources from the ancient church up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The congregation then prays or sings the Lord's Prayer and finally sings the Song of Simeon from Luke 2:29-32. The Song of Simeon, or "Nunc Dimittis" (its first two words in Latin), is the canticle most commonly associated with the Prayer at the Close of Day. The Song of Simeon was already considered a prayer for the evening in the fourth-century document called the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

In Compline, the "Nunc Dimittis" is often framed by an *antiphon* – a liturgical term for a refrain that is sung before and after (and sometimes in the middle of) a psalm of another Scripture song. This particular antiphon-prayer came into Compline in the late Middle Ages and frames the Song of Simeon nicely: "Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace."

Once again, a common theme of Compline comes through this closing song: Simeon, who held the baby Jesus in his arms, was ready to die in peace now that he had literally seen and held the One who embodied his salvation. Once we have reviewed the mercy of God at the end of the day, we too are ready to rest in peace, both at the end of day and whenever God brings us to the end of our lives.

The brief blessing that concludes the service is a blessing form from the medieval era. While many Lutheran services add a short hymn after the final blessing, when Compline is truly used in a nighttime setting, it may be very effective to allow this simple blessing to be the final words on the ears of the worshipers before they fall asleep.

Prayer at the Close of Day is especially striking when the service is conducted in a way that highlights the time for quiet, unhurried meditation on God's Word. Lighting in the church may be dimmed. Ceremony may be kept to a minimum. Rather than using the altar and lectern, the minister may conduct the entire service seated in a chair facing the assembly. In many ways, Compline resembles the family gathering together in their living room for bedtime prayers led by their father, only on a larger scale with a gathered congregation led by their pastor. (*Adapted from People's Bible Teachings: Christian Worship* ©2021, p. 156-158)

The order of service is found on p. 225-232 in the hymnal. I'm still on the fence as to what we will do for the actual services (use hymnals only, print the entire service out, combination). For today, we will use the hymnal with a few additional comments on these pages.

Make sure you have a hymnal to follow along, starting on page 225. We'll go through the service up to the Lord's Prayer.

Compline does not normally include the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but it does seem to be a fitting service at which to offer the Sacrament. After the Lord's Prayer (where it is in our current Service Settings) and before the Song of Simeon (which was placed after the Lord's Supper in red CW93) also seems to be a good place to have it. Following the Lord's Prayer (whether sung or spoken), the pastor will speak the Words of Institution, after which the congregation will sing a version of the "Agnus Dei" or "Lamb of God." This could be a hymn, another song, or taken from one of our regular service settings. Then the Sacrament will be distributed. There will be no hymns sung during distribution, but there is an option for the accompanist to play fitting music. Silence would be more than okay, however, given the nature of this worship service.

What questions or comments do you have about Compline?

The first monthly Compline service will be Wednesday, September 6<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 PM.