



Elevation of the Cross

September 14

Study Guide - Level 4 (Grades 9–12 / Ages 14–18)

Lesson Format

- Intro / Summary of the feast
- Review the epistle and gospel readings
- Review the festal hymns
- Read front page of handout together
- Use study guide content for discussion and Q&A on topics related to the feast
- Complete activities on inside pages of handout
- Recap / Review of the feast

Tips & Hints

- Use as few or as many of the questions and explanations found in the study guide based on ages of the youth, helping them discover how the Orthodox Faith can be a part of their daily life.
- Watch for the  in the handout for topics/questions which might spark conversations with participants.
- It's recommended to use open-ended questions, encouraging young people to think, share their experiences or ideas, and strengthen their relationship with Jesus Christ and His holy Orthodox Faith.
- Questions, ideas, feedback, and suggestions can be directed to the publisher at orthodoxjourneys@gmail.com

✦ Overview

Making the sign of the cross is something we all know and do, countless times every year.

Why?

Because the cross of Jesus Christ is at the heart of what we believe as Orthodox Christians.

We know that Christ died on the cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, thereby restoring us to communion with God.

This ultimate sacrifice provides us with the opportunity to live in the joy and radiance of the Resurrection.

To show our belief, identifying ourselves as Christians, we wear a cross - yes, both boys and girls, young men and ladies.

Having the cross on a chain, close to our heart, we show a physical reminder that Christ lives in our heart and is the focus of everything we do.

While we celebrate a historical event which took place hundreds of years ago, also on September 14, it's also a tangible reminder of what God did for us centuries before a Church was built on that site.

Nearly 5 months since Pascha, the Church places the cross in the middle of our community, giving us a visible reminder to give thanks to God for everything He does for us.

And we bow down in worship, not of the cross, but of God, the author and victor of our lives.

✔ Goal

After completing this handout, youth should be able to articulate the following:

- What we celebrate/commemorate on the feast of the Elevation of the Cross.
- Be familiar with the festal theme songs (apolytikion/troparion and kontakion).
- Understand what is featured in the festal icon.
- Why the feast is important, and celebrated annually in the church.
- Understand what Elevation and Worship mean, and why the Cross is central to our beliefs as Orthodox Christians.
- Know why this feast is relevant to us today.
- How the Church encourages us to live Godly lives regardless of age or situation.

✦ Apostolos / Epistle and Gospel Readings

Open the bible and have someone read the Apostolos/Epistle and another student read the Gospel lesson for the day.

Epistle/Apostol: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Gospel: John 19:6-11, 13-20, 25-28,30-35

Talk about the epistle reading:

Today's epistle was written by St. Paul. It is one of the books (or letters) found in the New Testament of our bible.

1) Ask: "What was the author of today's epistle talking about?"

Possible Answers

- The idea that we worship a God Who died on a cross makes no sense.
- For those who look for proof or facts, the Orthodox Christian teaching is foolish, silly, or "proof" that God doesn't exist.
- For us, who believe that Jesus is God, the message is clear - He was born of the Virgin Mary, was betrayed and accepted death on the cross for us.
- The wisdom of God will be misunderstood by society, but we as believers and faithful of God will comprehend it.

2) Ask: "How is the message of this epistle apply to our lives?"

Possible Answers

- Christ is the Word and Power of God - meaning He gives us the faith to live in the hope of the resurrection.
- Jesus' life is an example for us and anyone who chooses to accept the Son of God as their Savior.
- God will ultimately return at the Second Coming, but until then, we must live in the hope of the Resurrection, trusting God and doing His commandments.
- In our lives, we are encouraged to go to school, learn and get educated. It's important to also nurture our spiritual skills and knowledge to draw closer to God.

Talk about the Gospel reading:

Today's gospel was written by St. John.

It is one of the 4 written accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, found in the New Testament of our bible.

1) Ask: "What took place in today's Gospel reading?"

Possible Answers

- This is an abbreviated account of the crucifixion, reminding us of what we celebrated on Holy Friday.
- Jesus Christ was betrayed into the hands of sinners who condemned Him to death on a cross.
- The Gospel of John presents his personal testimony, because John was present at the crucifixion.
- Jesus commends his mother, the Theotokos to be with St. John as the faithful disciple. (We are called to be like St. John, keeping a close relationship with the Virgin Mary in our lives.)

2) Ask: "Why is this important for us living in the 21st century?"

Possible Answers

- This Gospel reading is at the heart of what we believe about God.
- The mercy of God is timeless.
- The crucifixion happened once for all, destroying the power of the devil and death over humanity.
- We live in the light of the Resurrection.
- We give thanks to God for His mercy and providing us redemption for our sins.

Hymnography

Have someone read the Troparion/ Apolytikion and Kontakion on the handout.

Explain: Troparion (tro - par - ee - ohn) or Apolytikion (ah - po - lee - tee - key - ee - ohn) and Kontakion (kon - tahk - ee - ohn) are theme songs for each feast, celebration, or saint.

The Troparion/Apolytikion are two names for the same hymn, while the Kontakion expands the idea/thought proclaimed in the Troparion or Apolytikion.

Each describes what we're celebrating today, who is involved in the event, and how this event or saint is important to our lives as Orthodox Christians.

These are celebratory hymns, rejoicing in God's mercy and wonders.

1) Ask: "What do these hymns teach us?"

Possible Answers

- We rely on God as our Savior.
- This hymn is considered to be the theme song of Orthodox Christians, it describes our relationship to God.
- Christ was voluntarily crucified on the cross for us.
- When we call on the Name of God, we profess our belief in Him.
- God has defeated the devil, and thereby all of our enemies and those who fight against us.
- Satan thought he would be victorious by turning the hearts of men cold, thereby crucifying Christ. But God is all powerful, and the devil isn't.

2) Ask: "How can the message of the hymns apply to our lives?"

Possible Answers

- As Orthodox Christians, we believe that God will defeat our enemies (both visible and invisible).
- The cross is now a weapon which represents peace, not death. God can do anything.
- Nothing can defeat the cross, even if at times, it seems that life is overwhelming or difficult.
- We hold up the cross, both in church and in our homes, because it's a reminder of God's victory for us.

A Closer Look

After reading the front page of the handout, discuss and explore the themes below. Related questions can be found on the next page "Discussion Questions."

Opening Review:

The feast of the Elevation of the Cross recounts a number of historical events in the early fourth century, culminating in 335, with the consecration of the Church of the Resurrection, also known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (The Sepulchre is the tomb of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem), and the establishment of the feast of the cross.

During the solemn event, the patriarch of Jerusalem lifted the cross high in the air for all to see and venerate. It had been found nine years earlier on the same location, after the Empress Helen (commemorated on May 21), had come to Jerusalem to restore the holy sites of Christianity.

Why we hold a big celebration for an object - not a person?

The finding of the cross is very important in the life of the Church, because it provides a tangible connection to the time of Jesus Christ here on earth.

In Orthodoxy, our crosses typically do not show the body of Christ, as we celebrate the risen Lord, Jesus. In some parishes, the cross may have an icon of the the crucified Christ as a reminder of His voluntary death, redeeming us from corruption and slavery to the devil.

Why do we celebrate the feast now?

While the Cross was actually discovered on March 6 in the year 326, it didn't seem appropriate to have a major celebration during Great Lent, when the faithful were preparing for Pascha. Instead, the celebration was moved to September, coinciding with the act of elevating the cross at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

It's important to remember there is still a celebration of the cross in the middle of Great Lent, on the third Sunday - or the midpoint, as a remnant of the original finding of the Cross of our Lord and to keep the cross at central in our lives, preparing us for Holy Week and the joy of Pascha.

Both commemorations, today's and the one during Great Lent, allow us to focus and contemplate on the role of the cross in our lives.

Ask: What does it mean to celebrate the cross?

It may seem contradictory to the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion, why celebrate something which resulted in the death of the Son of God, but that's precisely what St. Paul talks about in today's epistle/apostol reading.

For those outside the Orthodox Faith, the concept seems misguided or false. While Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians use the cross prominently in their churches (often at the exclusion of icons and other religious imagery - a topic for another day), some religions and non-Christian groups like Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons take great exception to the use of the cross at all.

The cross *was* an instrument of torture, a sign of defeat, and banishment from society. But once Christ died on the cross, it became a symbol of victory for us. This is why we wear the cross around our neck. We've "put it on" our body as a sign of our acceptance of God's plan of salvation, identifying ourselves as God's people, and members of His followers: the Church.

Ask: If we wear a cross, are we automatically saved?

Not exactly. Being Orthodox Christians means we need to live a life of godliness and sanctity. But that's not always easy. While the devil doesn't have power over us, he

enjoys tempting us in a constant effort to keep us from being with or like God.

Wearing a cross reminds us of what God did for us, and hopefully inspires us to:

- Live in the ways of God’s commandments
- Keeping the fasts
- Praying daily
- Helping others
- Repenting of our sins and forgiving others if they offend us
- Trying to do better each day
- Receiving the Eucharist

In this way, the cross is the instrument by which God gives life to humanity. And it helps us identify as followers of Christ.

When we wear It, kiss It, trace It over our bodies, or celebrate in church, it is honored for being the instrument/tool Jesus used to save us, thereby redirecting our attention and focus to God.

In the Scriptures

During the celebration of Vespers for the feast, we hear 3 readings from the Old Testament scriptures:

The first reading (Exodus 15:22-16:1) recounts how Moses turns bitter, undrinkable water pure by tossing a tree chosen by God into it. This symbolizes Christ purifying us and creation through the Cross. The bitterness of sinful humanity is cleansed by the tree of the cross.

The second reading (Proverbs 3:11-18) presents God’s wisdom as being a tree of life. The tree provides nourishment to people, just as the cross provides us with new life through the Resurrection.

The third reading (Isaiah 60:11-16) also looks at various types of wood and how they are used to make God’s sanctuary beautiful. The cross is always placed prominently within the church, and even adorns the top of the iconostasis, the dome, candle stands, banner poles, and on other liturgical items in church.

Wrap Up

While the cross is indeed an object, it is no longer just a random object, but now a sacred symbol proclaiming the resurrection of Christ. It has been transformed by Christ’s crucifixion on it. It is now an image of peace and love.

Think of special items you have at home – maybe your parents have something they treasure from their grandparents or parents, or they keep a special drawing you made in Kindergarten. These items holds special meaning for them (and you).

Likewise, the cross holds special meaning for us. It’s not magic or a good luck charm. Christ is alive, and therefore, the cross plays an active role in our daily lives. We show great respect for Christ by venerating His cross.

We don’t worship the cross, but honor it because God the Son touched the cross and died upon it. The veneration redirects the focus of our worship always and only to God.

Discussion Questions

These questions relate to the “Closer Look” feature on page 2 of the study guide.

Question #1:

Why didn’t God stop the Persians from taking the cross?

Possible Answers:

- We don’t believe God comes down and interferes in world events to give us whatever we want or think should happen for us to have the best, at the expense of others.
- We believe it’s up to us to live in humility, accepting whatever happens in our lives as opportunities to draw closer to God.
- Sometimes God allows things to happen, forcing us to reconsider our actions because we’ve strayed from His teachings or expectations.
- By reorienting our lives so God is at the center, we learn to accept difficult situations which may not be to our liking.

Question #2:

Why do we sing “Lord, have mercy” so much?

Possible Answers:

- This simple prayer is used constantly in our services and personal prayers, because it reminds us of God’s love and mercy for us, despite our sins and failings.
- When singing “Lord, have mercy” in the presence of the cross, we see how our prayer has already been answered. Christ died on the cross, defeating sin and death.
- In a way, the prayer becomes a hymn of worship, giving thanks to God for the mercy which He has shown on us, if we are willing to accept it on His terms, leading us to a life in Paradise with the Father.

If you attend the Matins service for the Feast of Cross and a bishop is serving, he will bless in the four directions (east, west, south, and north) as the people sing Lord, have mercy 70 times, as a remembrance of when Patriarch Macarius held the cross up for all to see and the people begin to sing “Lord, have mercy.”

Question #3:

Why is this feast important?

Possible Answers:

- Jesus wants us to be united with Him and God the Father in Heaven.
- We are encouraged to keep the cross at the center of our lives, surrounded by the saints, and those in the church, as inspiration and support as we venture through the difficulties and temptations of life.
- It’s sometimes hard for us to describe and understand Who God is, because we’re only human. But Christ became man, lived in society and ultimately died on the cross for us.
- Christ’s resurrection makes His death even more important. If He didn’t rise from the dead, it would have been “another death,” instead of the death which freed us from suffering.
- The promise of the Resurrection is not abstract, but a real and tangible experience for each of us.

Handout Activities

In the handout for the feast, there are a variety of activities which can be completed:

Front Page: Read the introductory text, ensuring the young people understand the feast, what took place, and how it relates to their lives. Read the festal hymns and scripture readings, using this study guide to understand their meanings.

Page 2: Read through the *Whos' Who in the Icon*, answering questions about the icon, who is portrayed, and what's taking place.

The icon of the Elevation of the Cross represents a historical event, and unlike other Great Feasts, Christ is not present in the icon, because the event took place in 335. But the placement of the cross reminds us of the crucifixion and God's plan of salvation through the cross.

Page 3: Answer the trivia questions about the feast, read the "Big Words" which relate to the feast, and discuss how young people can actively participate in the services of the feast - whether at home or in church.

Page 4: Read through the clues in the *Puzzle within a Puzzle* activity, helping the young people answer the questions. The letters placed within the circles are then used to complete a four-word phrase used in the liturgical hymns sung during Vespers on the eve of the feast.

The phrase celebrates the majesty of the cross, and what it represents for us as Orthodox Christians.

Page 5: Discuss how our parish is part of the universal church. We're not the only Orthodox Christians in the world. Explore the idea of common beliefs and practices, and how prayer and making the sign of the cross unites us to other Orthodox Christians around the world.

Watch the video produced by a small Orthodox church in northern Finland. The music being sung is "Save us, O Son of God, who rose from the dead, and we will sing to you: Alleluia!" and was composed by Elia Piertarinen, a modern choir member and composer of the Finnish Orthodox Church.

Discuss with the young people where they see themselves making the sign of the cross.

- At school? At our jobs? Before sports practice? Before meals? When getting up / going to bed?
- Before spending time with friends? In difficult situations? Other situations?

Helping youth see prayer and the cross as part of their daily lives is crucial for their spiritual maturation as Orthodox Christians.

Review and discuss why we make the sign of the cross, using the examples and outline provided on this page.

Page 6: This drawing of the Exaltation icon can be used for coloring by young and old alike. By creating our own icons, we synthesize our thoughts and knowledge of the feast and what Jesus Christ means to us as our God and Savior.

On The Web

Learn more about the feast on the internet:

Homily on the Feast:

By St. John of Shanghai, 20th century bishop in America
<https://www.oca.org/fs/sermons/the-cross-the-preserver-of-the-universe>

Liturgical Hymns for the Elevation of the Cross:

Sung in a variety of languages and melodies
<https://youtu.be/9e7HuSXuLUI>

Troparion/Apolytikion for the Elevation of the Cross:

In English:
<https://youtu.be/SdiJzHqW6gw>

Liturgical Texts for the Elevation of the Cross:

<https://www.oca.org/liturgics/music-downloads/elevation-of-the-lifegiving-cross>

