



Elevation of the Cross


Study Guide - Level 2 (Grades 3–5 / Ages 8–10)

September 14

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, to save us from Satan and sin. This sacrifice provides us with the opportunity to live with joy knowing that God loves us very much, and we can think of the feelings of joy and happiness from Pascha and the radiance of Jesus' Resurrection.

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

Having the cross on a chain, close to our heart, we show our love for God, providing Christ with a place in our lives, guiding what we do.

While we celebrate a historical event which took place hundreds of years ago on September 14, today we also remember what God did for us on the very first Holy Friday, when He died on the cross.

It's been nearly 5 months since Pascha, and the Church places the cross in the middle of our community, giving us a visible reminder to say "thank you" to God for everything He does for us.

And we bow down in worship to 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

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

- God sometimes does things which don't make sense to a lot of people.
- That's because He's God, and we're not.
- St. Paul tells us that some people will demand facts or have opinions which deny that Christ died on the Cross.
- 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.

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

Possible Answers

- Christ is the Word and Son of God - meaning He gives us the faith to live in the hope of the resurrection.
- Jesus gave us an example of how to be kind and loving to other people.
- Until God returns at the Second Coming, we should be loving, forgiving, humble, helpful, and patient, being good examples of Christ's love for others.
- In our lives, we are encouraged to go to school, learn and get educated. It's important to also practice things learned in church, drawing closer to God.

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

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 a shorter version of the gospel lessons read during Holy Week.
- We remember what God did for us, by having Jesus die on the cross.
- Jesus Christ, the Son of God was turned over to die on a cross when the people of Jerusalem didn't like what He preached.
- We know these things happened, because the author, St. John, was at the cross and 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 destroyed 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

- God is our Savior and we rely on Him to be present in our lives.
- We can call this hymn our anthem or theme song, because it says what we believe as Orthodox Christians.
- Christ was not forced to die on the cross, he chose to do it for us.
- When we pray "In the Name of Father..." we profess our belief in God.
- God defeated the devil for us, because He loves us.
- Satan is bad, and very mean sometimes, we have to be careful and focus on God to stay ready for living the right way.

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

Possible Answers

- As Orthodox Christians, we believe God will defeat our enemies (both visible and invisible).
- The cross is a symbol of peace and victory in God, it no longer represents death.
- 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 celebrates historical events from the early fourth century:

- The finding of the true cross of Jesus Christ by Saint Helen the Empress in 326
- 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) in 335
- The establishment of the feast of the cross also in 335

During the liturgical services on September 14, 335 Saint Macarius, the ruling bishop of Jerusalem, lifted the cross high in the air for all to see and venerate.

For a long time after Christ ascended to Heaven, the cross had been buried in the ground because pagans didn't want Christians to worship God on the site of the cross.

Why do we celebrate the cross?

The cross is very important for us personally, because it represents what Jesus Christ did for us, and in the life of the Church, because it provides a tangible connection to the time of Jesus Christ here on earth and teaches us about God's love for everyone.

Remember the celebration of the cross in the middle of Great Lent? The Church helps us to focus and contemplate on the role of the cross in our lives.

Ask: What does it mean to celebrate the cross?

Does it make sense to celebrate something which resulted in the death of the Son of God? Remember what St. Paul said in the epistle/apostol reading?

It's not going to make sense for people who don't believe in Jesus or are even Orthodox Christians, but that's ok. It's up to us to understand and worship God for His amazing accomplishments to help us live with Him in Paradise after we die.

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.

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.

This way, wherever we look, we see the image of our salvation, giving us a sense of joy and hope that God is present in our lives.

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 hold 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 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. If we can understand that, it's possible to describe the love God has for all of humanity.
- The promise of the Resurrection is not abstract, but a real and tangible experience for each of us.

Question #2:

What does it mean to "take up your cross and follow Christ"?

Possible Answers:

- Each of us will have struggles in life
- We get to choose if we want to follow Jesus in our lives (or not)
- When we take up our cross, we accept what God gives us and whatever happens, and we can pray to God to help us make it through whatever happens
- The life we lead will ultimately decide if we spend eternity in Heaven with God (or not)
- By taking up our cross, we recognize that we aren't alone, but can walk through life together with other Orthodox Christians
- The beauty of the Cross is that Jesus will help when we are in need

Question #3:

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, so we thank God for this ultimate example of mercy.
- In a way, the prayer becomes a hymn of worship, giving thanks to God for the mercy which He has shown on 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? Before sports practice? Before meals? When getting up / going to bed?
Before spending time with friends? In difficult situations? Other circumstances?

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>

