

# St. Gregory of Narek



When we look at the “facts” of St. Gregory’s life, it seems to be a quiet and uneventful one. We are not sure of the date of his birth and death, but he was born in about 950 and lived to about the age of

sixty.

Gregory lost his mother at an early age. After her death, his father became a bishop and also continued his work as a theologian and writer. So it was quite natural that



Gregory and his two older brothers grew up in an atmosphere where books, study, and spiritual effort were accepted as a central focus of life.

They lived in the province of Vaspoorgan, and all three brothers attended the Monastery of Narek near Lake Van. (One brother, Hovhannes, later became abbot or head of the monastery.) Gregory read the Bible daily, but not in the way that some of us do — as a small part of life. For Gregory it was a “life text,” giving the truest and fullest accounting of the meaning of human existence and destiny.

By the age of twenty-five, Gregory knew he was ready to be a celibate priest, and was ordained. Even at this age he was known as a writer of great spiritual depth and beauty. Far outside the monastery, people were reading his words and deepening their prayer life.

Gregory spent the rest of his life in the monastery. His work was that of coming closer to God through constant prayer, fasting, and effort to find and do God’s will. He also wrote, taught, and gave spiritual guidance to many who sought it.

Among his later works is the book of prayers he called *Lamentations*, so well known among Armenian Christians that they usually refer to it simply as “Narek.” Its style is not one familiar to us today. Its language is formal and complex, and things are phrased very strongly. It’s a style that was often used in his day, however, and fits his subject. Like many other really committed Christians, Gregory sees the depth of his own sin and the distance he has placed between himself and the glory of God. Yet the prayers always express a hope for God’s mercy. This is the situation we all are in, so the prayers really speak to, and for, all of us when we read them.

Gregory died in about 1101. He was buried in the monastery near the tomb of St. Santookht, the first martyr of the Armenian Church. Besides his *Lamentations*, he left writings praising the Holy Virgin, commentaries on the Bible’s *Song of*

*Songs*, and many poems and liturgical chants.

He had a quiet life, living mostly in the quiet of a monastery. Yet he left written work that still is well-known and has been for centuries — even the English poet Lord Byron praised the *Lamentations*. More important, he was a man of prayer. Who can say how many people were helped or brought closer to God through Gregory’s prayers? Who knows how many times he had interceded for our church and her members in his prayers?

Nobody knows these things. We only know that in St. Gregory of Narek, we see the power of prayerful effort. His prayers made him a strong, shining figure to those who knew him. That power has not really diminished at all for us who know only of him. He is with us, too, in a special way — as a saint of the church.



## St. Gregory’s Greatest Prayer

St. Gregory wrote the *Lamentations* late in his life. They are the prayers of a man who has come close enough to God to see more of his beauty and wonder than most people ever do. But when the saints saw God’s beauty, they also (as their writings tell us) saw more clearly the ugliness of their own sin, and their unworthiness to inherit God’s kingdom.

It is of these realizations that St. Gregory writes. Here is a chance to read some of his prayers (also called “elegies” in this text), with some points to notice suggested for you.

Read Elegy 3, part 2. Would you say that St. Gregory is interceding for others here? Name three groups of “others” mentioned in this section.

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Read part 3. What does Gregory hope his prayer can do for its readers? Name 5 kinds of distress that Gregory mentions here.

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Read Elegy 19, part 4. What contrasts does Gregory make here between himself and God?

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St. Gregory of Narek  
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## Objectives

Students will

1. Define intercession according to key concept above.
2. Enumerate Biblical and liturgical examples of intercession.
3. Relate intercession to caring for others (through tale by Hovhannes Toumanian).

## Background for Teacher

One of the most important things Christ shows us, by his words and his deeds, is to live for the other person rather than for ourselves. And one way we do this is to pray for and intercede for each other. There are many Biblical precedents for this—some are discussed in this lesson. Above all, Christ is our one true Intercessor—on the cross, through his self-sacrifice for us, and in his constantly outpoured love.

We believe that the church is first of all a *community* in the way that St. Paul described it. This is why we ask the saints to pray for us as well as offering prayers for each other ourselves. The saints are alive in Christ, and still with us in a special way.

Through this lesson on intercession, we can try to reinforce students' sense of the church as community. We can also emphasize to them their responsibility to care for every other person who shares the community with them.

## Materials Needed

- Enough copies of the *Book of Hours* for students to share
- Bibles

## Procedure

1. Open with a prayer, and introduce the topic of this session, using the information in the "Background" section to help you. Ask students why they think intercession is important to Christians, and try to elicit the idea that it's because intercession is one way of caring for each other. (5 min.)
2. Have students read the introduction and complete the "Intercession" crossword puzzle in their student texts; go over the answers afterward. (They will need the *Book of Hours* as well as Bibles.) (*Answers*—Across: 1. Forgive, 2. Jars, 3. Saints; Down: 1. Fig, 2. Jairus, 4. Servant.) (15 min.)
3. Introduce the story, "The Foolish Man Who Went to See God," by the well-known Armenian writer Hovhannes Toumanian. Tell the class that it, too, is about intercession, but with a special "twist." Have them read the story on pages 36-38 in their student texts.

Discuss the story, stressing these points and asking questions:

The man in the story seems kind, interceding for others by taking their requests to God, yet Toumanian calls him a "fool."

Why does he come to such a bad end? (Because he is not really concerned with the people he intercedes for. He merely takes a "shopping list" to God. He does not see his interdependence with everyone else, and does not see that finding his happiness will come from being *with* the others, not apart from them.)

Point out the selfish self-interest of the man in the story. Go over the Bible passages used for the crossword puzzle to see how, by contrast, each of those intercessors was truly and deeply concerned for another, rather than for self.

Emphasize again that intercession is an important part of the Christian call to give oneself for others, and to serve them. (20 min.)

4. Have students continue on the Personal Prayer Book. (10 min.)

5. Let students think about an intercession they know of—one made for them, or by them, or for someone else by someone else. They can begin (and finish for homework) a 300-word essay about this experience—why the person interceded, and the effects of the intercession on their or someone else's life. Some creative student may instead want to try writing a poem, or a story like Toumanian's or some other mode of artistic expression. This would be fine.

End the class as usual with a prayer. (10 min.)

## Session 4—St. Gregory of Narek

### Key Concept

St. Gregory is an example of a powerful pray-er, an intercessor, and one who submitted himself to God.

### Objectives

Students will

1. Describe St. Gregory of Narek.
2. Relate some of what his "Lamentations" contain.

### Background for Teacher

A study of St. Gregory of Narek is an especially good way to finish our unit on prayer because St. Gregory was so completely a man of prayer. He was a monastic who devoted his life to contemplation and study. He handed down, in his *Lamentations*, prayers for the rest of Christendom to use and contemplate. He had a quiet life, but with great results.

St. Gregory helps our students to see more clearly a point made in the first lesson of this unit, that prayer is work, and can be a lifelong, arduous occupation for those who take it seriously. While this total occupation may not be one that students decide to take on, it will give them a basis for considering prayer as a serious part of their own lives.



## Materials Needed

- Copies of *Lamentations of Narek* (translated by Mischa Kudian and available from the Diocese) for students to share

## Procedure

1. Open with a prayer. Go over students' essays (or other forms of expression) from last week. (12 min.)
2. Have students read the biographical data on St. Gregory in the student text. Afterward discuss these questions:
  - a. If we were to compare St. Gregory of Narek with a different kind of saint—Vartan Mamigonian for example—what differences might we point out? (Vartan was a man of action whose life was lived in the political and military spheres; Gregory was a cloistered monk.)
  - b. What similarities might we find? (Both worked in God's name and believed in the power of prayer.) (10 min.)
3. Divide the class into two groups. Using the *Lamentations* book, they can complete *St. Gregory's Greatest Prayer* exercise on page 40. Afterwards,

have each group tell what answers they came up with.

(In Elegy 3, part 2, Gregory does intercede for all the kinds of people he mentions, saying his prayer is for them all. In part 3 he expresses the hope that people in various kinds of distress can be healed by praying, and that *his* prayer will lead them to pray. In Elegy 19, part 4, Gregory sees darkness in himself and saving light in God.)

When finished with the group work, point out to the class that the *Lamentations* are filled with Biblical references. St. Gregory assumed that his readers knew the Bible well, and that these references would therefore be familiar.

Look together at part 2 of Elegy 22. Find the Biblical references (given on page 95 of the *Lamentations* book) to see how St. Gregory used them.

(20 min.)

4. Have the class work on and finish their Personal Prayer Books (if necessary they can be finished at home). Ask the class members to bring them next week. (18 min.)

Close the session in the usual way.

## Notes

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