

Topic: The Exaltation of the Precious Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ
Grade Level: 5th-8th
Lesson Duration: 45-60 minutes

Objective:

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand the history and significance of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.
- Recognize the role of Saints Constantine and Helen in finding and elevating the True Cross.
- Appreciate the theological and historical importance of the Cross in the Christian faith.

Materials:

- Bible (John 3:14-15; Galatians 6:14)
- Icons of the Elevation of the Cross
- Whiteboard/Markers
- Handouts with key points and timeline (optional)

Opening Prayer (5 minutes):

Begin with the singing or recitation of the Troparion of the Feast

Troparion — Tone 1

O Lord, save Your people and bless Your inheritance. Grant victories to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries. And by virtue of Your Cross, / preserve Your habitation.

Introduction (10 minutes):

Ask the students:

- "What do you know about the Cross of Christ?"
- "Why do you think the Cross is so important in Christianity?"

Introduce the Exaltation of the Cross:

- Explain that this feast celebrates both the finding of the True Cross by Empress Helen and the return of the Cross from captivity.
- Highlight that it is a day of triumph and reverence for the Holy Cross, symbolizing our salvation.

Historical Background and Story (15-20 minutes):

***Please see attached story**

1. Read Bible Passages:
 - John 3:14-15: Jesus speaks of His crucifixion and the promise of eternal life.
 - Galatians 6:14: St. Paul speaks of boasting only in the Cross of Christ.
2. Tell the Story of the Elevation of the Cross:
 - The Cross was hidden by pagan Romans and later discovered by Empress Helen.

- Helen's search led to the discovery of the True Cross, evidenced by miracles such as the resurrection of a dead man and healing of the sick.
- Emperor Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and celebrated the Exaltation of the Cross in 326.
- In 602, the Cross was taken to Persia, but it was returned to Jerusalem in 628. Emperor Heraclius carried it back with humility, recognizing the true nature of Christ's sacrifice.

Discussion (10-15 minutes):

Ask the students:

1. Why do you think it was significant for Empress Helen and Emperor Constantine to find and honor the True Cross?
2. What does the return of the Cross from Persia teach us about God's providence and the power of the Cross?
3. How does the story of Emperor Heraclius' return of the Cross reflect the humility and reverence we should have toward Christ's sacrifice?

Highlight key points:

- The Cross is a symbol of victory over sin and death.
- The finding and reverence of the Cross connect Christians across history and underscore its importance in our faith.
- The return of the Cross shows that God's plan and power extend through all circumstances.

Activity: Creative Reflection (10-15 minutes):

1. Create a Cross Art Project:
 - Provide students with paper and art supplies. Ask them to create a drawing or collage that represents the significance of the Cross in their lives or in the story of its exaltation.
2. Write a Reflection:
 - Have students write a short reflection on what the Cross means to them personally or how the story of the Exaltation inspires them.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes):

Conclude with a prayer of gratitude for the Cross:

"Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of the Cross and the salvation it brings us. Please help us live in reverence and gratitude for this sacred symbol. Amen."

Optional Homework/Follow-Up:

- Encourage students to learn more about the history of the Cross and its significance in the Orthodox Church.
- Have students share what they've learned with their families and discuss the importance of the Cross in their faith.

Feast Day Connection:

Discuss the celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 27/14. Encourage students to participate in church services and reflect on the importance of the Cross in their daily lives.

The Exaltation of the Precious Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

The pagan Roman emperors tried to destroy the memories of the sacred places where our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for the people and was resurrected. Emperor Adrian (117 - 138) built a temple of the pagan goddess Venus and a statue of Jupiter on Golgotha and above the Holy Sepulcher. Pagans gathered at this place and performed idol sacrifices.

However, after 300 years, by the Providence of God, the great Christian sites - the Holy Sepulcher and the Life-Giving Cross were again found by Christians and opened for worship. This event happened under the Equal-to-the-Apostles Emperor Constantine the Great (Comm. May 21), the first of the Roman emperors to stop the persecution of Christians. Saint Equal-to-the-Apostles Constantine the Great (306-337), after his victory in 312 over Maxentius, the ruler of the Western part of the Roman Empire, and over Licinius, the ruler of its Eastern region, in the year 323 became the sovereign ruler of the vast Roman Empire.

In the year 313, he issued the so-called Edict of Milan and legalized the Christian religion. The persecution of Christians in the Western half of the empire ceased. Although the ruler Licinius signed the Edict of Milan to please Constantine, he continued the persecution of Christians. Only after his final defeat did the decree of 313 on religious tolerance extend to the eastern part of the empire. Emperor Constantine, who, by God's help, won victory over his enemies in three wars, saw God's sign in heaven - the Cross with the inscription "By this you conquer."

Eagerly desiring to find the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, Equal-to-the-Apostles Constantine sent his mother, the pious Empress Helen (Comm. May 21), to Jerusalem, supplying her with a letter to Patriarch Macarius of Jerusalem. Although the holy empress Helen was already elderly, she enthusiastically took up the task. The queen ordered the destruction of the pagan temples and idol statues that filled Jerusalem. Looking for the Life-Giving Cross, she asked Christians and Jews, but for a long time, her search remained unsuccessful.

Finally, she found an old Jewish man named Judas, who said he knew where the Cross was. The Cross was under the Temple of Venus. After praying, they began to dig in the ground. Soon the Holy Sepulcher and, not far from it, three crosses, a tablet with an

inscription made by order of Pilate, and four nails that pierced the Body of the Lord were discovered. Patriarch Macarius placed the crosses one by one on the deceased man to find out which of the three crosses was the Savior's. When the Cross of the Lord touched the dead man, he came to life. When people saw the resurrected, it was a true joy and a vivid sign that this was the Life-Giving Cross of Jesus Christ.

The Christians, who came in countless multitudes to venerate the Holy Cross, asked Saint Macarius to lift and erect the Cross so that everyone could, albeit from afar, reverently contemplate Him. Then the Patriarch and other clerics raised the Holy Cross high, and the people, crying out: "Lord, have mercy" reverently bowed to the Life-giving Tree. This solemn event took place in 326.

At the acquisition of the Life-Giving Cross, another miracle happened: a seriously ill woman, when overshadowed by the Holy Cross, was immediately healed. Elder Judas and other Jews believed in Christ and accepted holy Baptism. Judas received the name Cyriacus and was subsequently ordained Bishop of Jerusalem. In the reign of Julian the Apostate (361 - 363), he was martyred for Christ (commemorated the Hieromartyr Cyriacus on October 28).

The Holy Empress Helen marked the places connected with the earthly life of the Savior, the foundation of more than 80 churches erected in Bethlehem - the site of the Nativity of Christ, on the Mount of Olives, from where the Lord ascended to heaven, in Gethsemane, where the Savior prayed before His sufferings and where the Mother of God was buried after Dormition. Saint Helen brought with her to Constantinople a part of the Life-Giving Tree and nails.

Equal-to-the-Apostles Emperor Constantine commanded to erect a majestic and vast temple in Jerusalem in honor of the Resurrection of Christ, which included both the Holy Sepulcher and Golgotha. The building of the Temple took about ten years. Saint Helen did not live to see the Temple's consecration as she died in 327. The blessing of the Temple was on September 13, 335. The next day, September 14, was established to celebrate the Exaltation of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross.

On this day, we remember another event associated with the Cross of the Lord - his return from Persia after 14-year captivity back to Jerusalem. During the reign of the Byzantine emperor Phocas (602 - 610), the Persian king Khosra II defeated the Greek army in the war against the Greeks, plundered Jerusalem, and took away the Life-Giving Cross of the Lord and the Holy Patriarch Zacharias (609 - 633) into captivity. The Cross stayed in Persia for 14 years, and only under the emperor Heraclius (610 - 641), who, with the help of God, defeated Khozroy and made peace with the latter's son, Syroes, were the Christians returned to their shrine - the Cross of the Lord.

With great triumph, they brought the Life-Giving Cross to Jerusalem. In the royal crown and purple, Emperor Heraclius carried the Cross of Christ to the Church of the

Resurrection. Next to the king was Patriarch Zacharias. At the gate leading up to Golgotha, the emperor suddenly stopped and could not move on. The Holy Patriarch explained to the Tsar that the Angel of the Lord was blocking his path, for He, Who carried the Cross to Golgotha to redeem the world from sins, completed His Way of the Cross in a humble form. Then Heraclius, taking off his crown and purple, put on simple clothes and freely brought the Cross of Christ into the Temple.

In a sermon on the Exaltation of the Cross, St. Andrew of Crete (Comm. July 4) says: "The cross is erected, and all the faithful flock, the Cross is erected, and the city triumphs, and the nations make a feast."