

CHANGED BY GRACE

SOME INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS ON THE EASTERN ORTHODOX UNDERSTAND- ING OF DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

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Throughout history, humanity has struggled to come to terms with death and issues surrounding the afterlife. To answer the questions of the faithful and help guide them on their spiritual quest and journey, religious teachers offered instruction on these matters. Through the centuries and with the influence of various contributing factors, doctrinal teachings about death and the afterlife were formulated. These teachings often came as a response or clarification to the questions which challenged the believer. It was in this style and manner that the theological positions of the Eastern Orthodox Church on death and the afterlife developed. In some cases, it may be safe to say that the Orthodox Church is still developing her theological statements on certain positions, as humanity faces new challenges and issues in this field.

Although many of the theological foundations had been set in the Hebrew scriptures, the teachings and resurrection of Jesus brought new

meaning and implications. This is clear and evident in the writings of St. Paul, who says:

But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first;

Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.¹

The words of Paul, though, did not provide all the answers; questions and confusion remained. Later authors would contribute to the process of defining and refining the doctrines concerning death and the afterlife.

The themes of death, resurrection, and the afterlife are the very heart and core of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith. These teachings are affirmed not only in the Nicæan Creed, which is recited at every Divine Liturgy and many other liturgical services, but also beautifully expressed in the prayers read by the clergy during the celebration of the Liturgy of Saint Basil. "He brought us to the knowledge of You, the true God and Father, redeeming us to Himself as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and, when He had cleansed us in water and sanctified us with the Holy Spirit, He gave Himself up as a ransom to death, to which we were in bondage, sold under sin. He descended into Hades by way of the Cross, that He might fill all things in Himself and loosed the pangs of death. Rising on the third day, He prepared the way for the

resurrection of all flesh from the dead, because it was not possible for Him (the Author of life) to be held by it.”²

While many people see death as the end of the life cycle, the Orthodox Christian understands that it is only a step into the next phase of life, the resurrection of all as mentioned in the Gospel of John. For the believer, death is not an end in itself; rather, it is a necessary passageway into eternity. Still, death has always been and remains a mystery, incomprehensible to human intellect and reason.

A noted Orthodox author writes the following: “From the time death entered into the world as a consequence of sin, no one has looked upon death with indifference. And while we all accept that death is the estate of life, we find it impossible to imagine ourselves dead! But whether we comprehend this or not, from the moment we come into this world, we are indeed destined to die. Furthermore, while death comes only once in our lifetime, we fear it every day. And death is inexorable. It comes as a skeleton holding a large sickle—to ‘reap’ man, not allowing him to take anything with him. And when one of our fellow human beings crosses over to the opposite side, the rest of us remain on this side frightened and bewildered.”³

In order to understand the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox tradition concerning death and the afterlife, one must start at the very beginning. One must reflect on creation itself. A hymn by Saint John of Damascus, the noted theologian and hymnographer, states: “When in Your image and likeness You in the beginning did create and fashion man You gave him a home in Paradise, and made him the chief of your creation. But by the devil’s envy, alas, beguiled to eat the fruit forbidden, transgressor then of your commandments he became; wherefore back to earth, from which he was first taken, you did sentence him to return again, O Lord, and to pray you to give him rest.”⁴ Death, then, comes as a result of the transgression and disobedience of the first created, Adam and Eve, who failed to reach their true calling. Because of their action of disobedience, they and the created world are in a state of “fallen nature.” This state allows not only for corruption and decay but also for death.

But God did not create the human race to have death as an end; rather, he created humanity to enter into communion with him into eternity.

As part of the plan of divine economy, God's plan for the restoration of creation, "when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."⁵ Christ came into the world to save and redeem fallen humanity and restore the fallen world to a natural state. Saint Romanos the Melodist puts this theological matter into poetic words in one of the stanzas found in the Akathist Hymn. He writes: "Wishing to save the world, the Creator of all came to us of His own will. Being at once our Shepherd and our God, He appeared among us as a man. And, appearing as we are, He called us to Himself."⁶ Through his word and teachings, Christ offered the path that would lead the believer back to the kingdom, including passing from death into life. With these thoughts in mind, one can understand that death was no longer understood as a curse. Rather, the love of God was able to transform death into a blessing and this gave the means for humanity to resume its true journey to union with God.

For the Orthodox Christian, death is understood as a means of passage, as it is the moment when the soul leaves the body and travels to the place where it shall remain until the general resurrection. This act of separation is described by Saint John of Damascus in the hymns of the funeral services, where he writes, "Indeed, how awesome is the mystery of our death! How the soul is forcibly severed from its harmonious union with the body, and this natural bond of coexistence is broken by divine will."⁷ The theology of the Fall, death, and the separation of soul and body are expressed in the great prayer of forgiveness which a hierarch reads at the end of the funeral service. The prayer goes as follows: "O Lord our God, in your inexpressible wisdom you created man out of the earth, giving him form and adorning him with beauty, as a precious and heavenly being, to the praise and honor of your glory and kingdom, making him in your image and likeness. But when he violated your commandment and did not preserve the image which had been entrusted

to him, so that this evil state should not endure forever, in your love for mankind you ordered that this mixture and blend, and the unbroken bond that you established, O God of our Fathers, should by your will be severed and dissolved; and that the soul should proceed until the general resurrection to the place from where it received its being, and that the body should be dissolved into the elements from which it was made.”⁸

It is clear and evident in both the hymn and the prayer that at death, the soul and body separate. Even those who do not believe in God understand that the “life force” leaves the human body and one is, then, dead. For the Orthodox Christian, though, it is not such an easy or simple formula. At death, the body begins the process of returning to the elements of which it was made, while the soul awaits the time of the great and glorious general resurrection when all shall rise from the tombs. The soul continues to have its own existence after its separation from the body. This is affirmed by the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew when he says, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”⁹ These thoughts and statements leave questions which need to be answered, especially the question of “where does the soul reside after death?” Saint John Chrysostom responds to this question in his homilies on the Gospel of Matthew. He tells his audience that the souls go to “a place” and there they wait for the universal resurrection.¹⁰ While there are no details as to “the place,” it would be best to understand it as a spiritual realm and not “a place” as defined by space and other human expressions.

It would be proper, at this point, to make a few comments related to the body following the death of a person. It is important to understand that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, special attention and care are given to the body of the deceased, “as the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,” as Paul states in the letter to the Christian community in Corinth.¹¹ In some places, there are special rites for washing and preparation of the body, which are a reflection of the anointing and preparation of the body of Christ. A type of burial shroud is even used in some parts of the Orthodox world, again reminding one of Christ and his own

burial. In the strictest expression of Eastern Orthodoxy, the body is not to be cremated or given to science for research. These actions are understood by many to be a type of irreverence shown for God's creation and such practices would be seen as harmful and destructive. In fact, in traditional Orthodox lands there is no embalming, so the body may return to the earth as soon as possible. The embalming of a person would only serve as an obstacle in the natural process. The faithful are reminded of this when the clergy recite the following words when pouring some earth on the body of the dead person: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof the world and those who dwell therein; you are earth and to earth you shall return."¹² Of course, in the United States and in many other lands where family members may need extra time to travel to the funeral, embalming has become the natural and customary practice in most Christian communities. While this practice may seem good and necessary, it distorts the natural process that the hymns and prayers of the Orthodox funeral service imply. Clearly, the body is to return to the place of its origin, the earth. This matter becomes quite challenging in places where cremation is mandatory. Or what of those who have died in a fire and were never properly buried? These and other similar questions are the exception to the rule and not the standard measure.

Christians, according to the Eastern Orthodox expression of faith, do not focus on death. Rather, the focus and central theological doctrine rests on the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, who rose from the dead in his glorified body. The two are inseparable. Through and with the resurrection of Christ, a new time and age begin. The pages of old are closed and new chapters are to be written. Death no longer has power and authority, as it has been conquered by Jesus. In this way, one understands that Christ opened for all humanity the way to incorruptibility—to immortality and eternal life.

At some point in time, all things shall come to pass and there will be a final judgment. In *The Evergetinos*, a compilation of sayings and teachings of Church Fathers and monastics, one reads the following concerning the Final Judgment:

The Lord says in the Gospel: “Walk while ye have the light” (St. John 12:35). Also, through the Prophet He says: “In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee” (Isaiah 49:8). This saying of the Prophet is interpreted by the Apostle, who says: “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 6:2). And a similar thought is expressed by the wise Solomon, when he says: “Whatsoever thy hands findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). From all of these Biblical testimonies, it is clearly demonstrated that in the moral state in which one departs from this world, in the same state will he appear before the impartial Judgment Seat, in order to be judged.¹³

Orthodox Christians believe that until that moment in time, those who have left this life will experience a foretaste of the kingdom. Once the final judgment is passed, the righteous, though, will enjoy the blessings that have been prepared for them “from the foundation of the world.”¹⁴ The sinners and those who have failed in their true calling will also journey to their respective place for eternity. The Fathers of the Church have expressed their thoughts on this matter and have put into words what is to be expected. In the patristic tradition regarding the righteous, one finds expressions that call eternal life “the real life.” The hymnography and prayers of the Church speak of the blessed state and place as being “without pain, without sorrow, a place where there is no mourning.”¹⁵ Saint Basil the Great writes: “That land is of the living where night does not exist and where there is no sleep, the imitation of death. There, there is no material eating and drinking—the supports of our weakness; there are no sicknesses, no pains, no medicines, no courts of law, no businesses, no crafts, and no money—the beginning of evils, the subject of wars, and the root of enmity. It is the land of the living, not of the dying because of sin, but of the living the true life in Christ Jesus.”¹⁶

The placement of a person in the kingdom of God is the return and restoration of humanity to full communion with God, which is the purpose and ultimate calling of humanity. In Orthodox theological language, the term *theosis* is often translated as “deification.” It is what is stated in 2 Peter 1:4 when he writes that we are to “become partakers of divine nature.” Human nature is not obliterated and lost; rather, it is transformed and changed by grace. It is impossible, though, to fully comprehend what this means, as it is beyond all human understanding and logic. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes the following, which might offer a better understanding of the theological implication this carries, “The aim of the Christian life, which Seraphim described as the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God, can equally well be defined in terms of deification. Basil described the human person as a creature who has received the order to become a god; and Athanasius, as we know, said that God became human that we humans might become god. ‘In My kingdom, said Christ, I shall be God with you as gods.’ Such, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, is the final goal at which every Christian must aim: to become god, to attain *theosis*, ‘deification’ or ‘divinization’. For Orthodoxy our salvation and redemption means our deification.”¹⁷

In the text *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers*, Christopher Hall draws from the ancient tradition of the Church and brings to the attention of the reader various materials from the Fathers. In his chapter on the resurrection of the body, he quotes Saint Justin the Martyr, who says: “Christ has come in his power from the almighty Father, . . . calling all men to friendship, benediction, repentance and community, which should take place in the same land of all the saints (Canaan), of which he has pledged that there shall be an allotted portion for all the faithful. . . . Wherefore, men from every land, whether slaves or free men, who believe in Christ and recognize the truth of his words and those of the Prophets, fully realize that they will one day be united with him in that and, to inherit imperishable blessings for all eternity.”¹⁸

These thoughts can be understood when one looks at an Orthodox icon of the last judgment. In the center of the icon, Christ sits upon the throne and judges the nations. Surrounding him are the Theotokos, the Saints, and those who have been found just and righteous, according to his standards and measures. They shine in the glory of the light which comes from him. They stand and radiate in the warmth of his illuminating glory. These are the persons who have heard the calling, followed the path, and entered through the narrow gate. These are the sheep in the parable of the Last Judgment. The sinners and those not found worthy of his kingdom, though, burn and are consumed in the fire. These are those who have failed in the journey of life and those who have rejected the invitation to the eternal banquet of life; they are the goats spoken of in the parable. For the sinners, the light consumes and burns; for the righteous, the light illumines and glorifies. They sit in the company of Christ and enjoy that blessing that was promised to them.

The above thoughts and statements only open the door for exploration and study, as the theology and teachings concerning death and the afterlife are rather complex. May these words entice the reader to study further and explore the depth of Orthodox beauty.

NOTES

1. 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17. This passage is used in the Orthodox funeral service. All scripture quotes are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. St. Basil the Great, *Liturgy of St. Basil*, trans. Leonidas Contos and Spencer Kezios (Narthex Press, 2007), 22.
3. Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis, *The Mystery of Death* (Athens, Greece: The Orthodox Brotherhood of Theologians, 1993), 3.
4. Orthodox funeral service, Idiomela of St. John of Damascus, Grave Tone. All liturgical translations are the author's own, based on the Greek text in Evagoras Constantinidis, ed., *The Priest's Service Book (Mikron Euchologion, Agiasmatarion)* (Merrilville, IN: Father Evagoras Constantinides, 1989), 223.
5. Galatians 4:4–5.

6. Spencer Kezios, trans., *The Akathist Hymn* (Narthex Press, 2008), 98.
7. Orthodox funeral service, Idiomele of St. John of Damascus, fourth tone. See Constantinidis, *The Priest's Service Book (Mikron Euchologion, Agiasmatarion)*, 220.
8. Constantinidis, *Priest's Service Book*, 233.
9. Matthew 10:28.
10. See J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae: Series Graeca* (Paris: Migne, 1857), 57:353–54.
11. See 1 Corinthians 6:19.
12. Orthodox funeral service, final anointing of the deceased before the casket is sealed. See Constantinidis, *Priest's Service Book*, 237.
13. Hrmk. Patapios, ed., *Evergetinos: Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), 4:357.
14. Matthew 25:34.
15. Orthodox funeral service, Kontakion. See Constantinidis, *Priest's Service Book*, 218.
16. St. Basil the Great, *On Psalm 104:5*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae: Series Graeca* (Paris: Migne, 1857), 29:493.
17. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity*, 3rd rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 225.
18. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 139, in Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 254.