

Paradise and Hell in the Orthodox Tradition*

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On the Sunday of Meatfare “we commemorate the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and His impartial Judgment.” This phrase in the *Synaxarion*, “we commemorate,” affirms that the Church, as the Body of Christ, experiences the Second Coming of Christ in her worship as an “actuality” and not as something to be awaited in the course of history. This is because through the Eucharist we are translated to the Heavenly Kingdom, to that which transcends history. It is from this perspective that the question of Paradise and Hell is to be approached in an Orthodox spirit.

Mention is made in the Gospels¹ of the “kingdom” and “eternal fire.” In the Gospel passage which is read at the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of Meatfare, the “kingdom” is man’s Godward destiny. The “fire” is “prepared” for the Devil and his angels (the demons), not because God so wills, but because they are unrepentant. The “kingdom” is “prepared” for those who are faithful to the will of God. The “kingdom” (uncreated glory) is Paradise, whereas the (eternal) “fire” is Hell (“everlasting punishment”²). At the dawn of history, God calls man to Paradise, to communion with His uncreated Grace. At the end of history, man faces Paradise and Hell. What this means, we shall see in what follows. We hasten to add, however, that what follows is the most central theme of our Faith, the touchstone of Orthodox Christianity.

1. Paradise and Hell are frequently mentioned in the New Testament. In St. Luke 23:43, Christ says to the thief: “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” However, the thief also refers to Paradise when he says: “Lord, remember me...in thy kingdom.”³ According to St. Theophylact of Ohrid, “the thief is in Paradise, that is, the Kingdom.”⁴ The Apostle Paul confesses that already in this world “he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”⁵ In the Apocalypse we read: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”⁶ According to the interpretation of Arethas of Cæsarea, “Paradise is to be understood as blessed and everlasting life.”⁷ Thus, Paradise, eternal life, and the Kingdom of God are identical.

Regarding Hell, see the following passages from the New Testa-

ment: St. Matthew 25:46 (“into everlasting punishment”); 25:41 (“everlasting fire”); 25:30 (“outer darkness”); 5:22 (“hell [Gehenna of] fire”); I St. John 4:18 (“...because fear hath torment”). These are all ways of expressing what we mean by the term “Hell.”

2. Paradise and Hell are not two different places. Such an interpretation is idolatrous. They are two different states (modes of existence), which derive from the same uncreated source and are apprehended as two different experiences. Or rather, they are the same experience, apprehended differently by man in proportion to his internal state. This experience is the vision of Christ in the uncreated light of His Divinity: in His “Glory.” After the Second Coming, and throughout unending eternity, we men will all see Christ in His Uncreated Light. And then “shall come forth they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”⁸ In the presence of Christ, men will be separated (“sheep” and “goats,” to His right and left respectively); that is, divided into two groups: those who see Christ as Paradise (“exceedingly beautiful splendor”⁹) and those who see Him as Hell (“a consuming fire”¹⁰).

Paradise and Hell are the same reality. This is shown by the iconographic depiction of the Second Coming. From Christ there flows a river as radiant as golden light at the upper end, where the Saints are, and fiery at the lower end, where the demons and the unrepentant are (“those who have never repented,” as one of the *Stichera* at the Praises for this day says). For this reason, in St. Luke 2:34 it is said of Christ that He “is set for the fall and rising again of many.” For some, those who have received Him and followed the cure of the heart proffered by Him, Christ becomes the resurrection unto His eternal life; but for others, who have rejected Him, He becomes their downfall and Hell.

See the following Patristic testimonies: St. John of Sinai (of the *Ladder*) says that the Uncreated Light of Christ is a “fire that consumes and a light that illumines.”¹¹ St. Gregory Palamas observes: “He, it says, will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire [St. Matthew 3:11]; fire, that is, which has the capacity to illuminate and to chastise, each person receiving what is appropriate according to the merit of his own disposition.”¹² And elsewhere: the light of Christ, “although single and participable by all, is partaken of not uniformly, but differently.”¹³

Consequently, Paradise and Hell are not simply a recompense or a punishment (condemnation), but the way in which each of us experiences the vision of Christ, in accordance with the state of his heart. In essence, God does not punish, though for pedagogical [and psychological—*Ed.*] reasons Scripture does talk in terms of punishment. The more spiritual one becomes, the more correctly does he understand the language of Scripture and of our Tradition. It is our human condition (pure-impure, repentant-unrepentant) that determines whether we shall receive the Light of Christ as Paradise or as Hell.

3. The anthropological issue in Orthodoxy is how man will see Christ eternally as Paradise and not as Hell; that is, how he will participate in His heavenly and eternal “Kingdom.” And it is here that the difference between Orthodox Christianity and various other religions becomes evident. The latter promise some kind of “happiness,” and especially after death. Orthodoxy is not a quest for happiness, but a cure for the sickness of religion, as the late Father John Romanides, in the spirit of the Fathers, constantly preached. Orthodoxy is an open hospital within history (a “spiritual infirmary,” according to the Divine Chrysostomos¹⁴) that provides a cure for the heart (purification), in order that, through progressive illumination of the heart by the Holy Spirit, one might ultimately attain to “deification,” the unique destiny of mankind. This process, which has been very fully described by Father John Romanides and Metropolitan Hierotheos of Navpaktos, is the healing of mankind as experienced by all of our Saints.

This is the meaning of life in the Body of Christ (the Church). This is the Church’s *raison d’être*. This is the end at which all of Christ’s redemptive work aims. St. Gregory Palamas says that the preëternal counsel of God for mankind is that he should “contain the majesty of the Divine Kingdom,” that man should attain to deification. This is the purpose of creation. And St. Gregory continues: “As well, His Divine and ineffable self-emptying, His Theandric way of life, His salvific sufferings, and all of the mysteries [i.e., the work of Christ on earth] were providentially and all-wisely foreordained for this end.”¹⁵

4. It is, however, significant that not all people respond to Christ’s invitation, and thus not everyone participates in His uncreated Glory in the same way. Christ teaches this in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.¹⁶ Man spurns Christ’s offer, becomes an enemy of God, and rejects the salvation offered by Christ. (This is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, since it is in the Holy Spirit that we receive Christ’s calling.) Such are those, mentioned in the hymn, “who have never repented” (*supra*, p. 13, ¶2, ll. 4-5). “God is never at enmity,” observes the Divine Chrysostomos; it is we who become His enemies and reject Him.¹⁷ The unrepentant man becomes demonized by his own choice. God does not will it. According to St. Gregory Palamas: “...this is not My antecedent will; I did not create you for this purpose, nor did I prepare the fire for you. The unquenchable fire was kindled beforehand for the demons, who have an immutable disposition for evil; you are joined to them by a similarly impenitent resolve”; “your dwelling with the evil angels is a matter of free choice.”¹⁸ In other words, it is something that man freely chooses.

The rich man and Lazarus behold the same reality, God in His uncreated Light. The rich man attains to the Truth, to the vision of Christ, but cannot participate in it as Lazarus does. Lazarus is “comforted,” whereas the rich man is “tormented.”¹⁹ Christ’s statement that “they

have Moses and the prophets,”²⁰ regarding those who are still in this world, means that all of us are without any excuse, since we have the Saints, who possess the experience of deification and summon us to enroll in their way of life and to achieve deification as they did. Thus, those in torments, like the rich man, have no excuse.

One’s attitude towards his fellow man is indicative of his inner state and is, for this reason, the criterion of the Judgment at the Second Coming.²¹ This does not mean [of course] that a man’s faith and fidelity to Christ will be disregarded. The latter are prerequisites, since our attitude towards others reveals whether or not we have God within us.²² The [themes] of the first Sundays of the *Triodion* revolve around our attitude towards our fellow man. On the first Sunday, the Pharisee (outwardly pious) justifies himself (appears holy) and disdains (disparages) the publican. On the second Sunday, the “elder” brother (a replica of the seemingly pious Pharisee) grieves over the return (salvation) of his brother. Likewise outwardly pious, he had a false piety that did not engender love. On the third Sunday (Meatfare), this attitude extends to the judgment seat of Christ and proves to be the criterion of eternal life.

5. The experience of Paradise or Hell is beyond language and the senses. It is an uncreated reality, not a created one. The Franks forged the myth that Paradise and Hell are created realities. It is a myth that those in torment will not see God, as is the concept of the absence of God. The Franks (e.g., Dante) also understood the fire of Hell as created. Orthodox Tradition remains faithful to Scripture, which says that those in torment will see God (e.g., the rich man in the parable), but as a “consuming fire.” The Frankish Scholastics understood Hell as punishment and privation of the rational vision of the Divine essence. In Biblical and Patristic terms, however, Hell represents man’s failure and his refusal to coöperate with Divine Grace in order to attain to the “illuminating” vision of God (Paradise) and selfless love.²³ Consequently, there is no such thing as the absence of God, but only His presence. This is why the Second Coming is fearful.²⁴ It is an ineluctable reality, towards which Orthodoxy is permanently oriented (“I look for the resurrection of the dead...”).

Those in torment, whose hearts are hardened like those of the Pharisees,²⁵ eternally see salvation as fire, for their condition does not admit of any other form of salvation. They, too [like the righteous], “come to the end”—to the end of their journey—but only the righteous end up being saved. Those in torment end up being punished. Salvation for them is Hell, since in this life they pursued only happiness. The rich man in the parable “received his good things,” whereas Lazarus endured “evil things” without a murmur.²⁶ This point is expressed by St. Paul: “Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath

built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."²⁷ The righteous and the unrepentant pass through the uncreated "fire" of the Divine presence. The former, however, will pass through unscathed, whereas the latter will be burned. The latter, too, will be "saved," but in the way that one passes through a fire. Evthymios Zigabenos (twelfth century) observes in this regard: "[Paul sees] God as fire illuminating and brightening the pure, but burning and darkening the defiled."²⁸ Theodoretos of Kyros writes concerning [the words] "he shall be saved": "He shall be saved through fire, being himself tried,"²⁹ that is, as one who passes through fire. If he has a suitable covering, he will not be burned; otherwise, while he is "saved," he is nonetheless scorched.

Consequently, the fire of Hell has nothing in common with the Frankish [notion of] "Purgatory," being neither created nor a punishment nor any kind of intermediate state. Such a conception represents a transfer of responsibility to God. It is, however, entirely our own responsibility whether we accept or reject the salvation (cure) offered by God. "Spiritual death" is the vision of the uncreated Light, the Divine Glory, as fire. St. John Chrysostomos comments, in his Ninth Homily on I Corinthians: "The punishment is eternal. . . , sinners 'shall be punished with everlasting destruction' [II Thessalonians 1:9]. . . . As for the expression 'shall be burned,' this means that the sinner will not endure the force of the fire." And he continues: "What he [Paul] means is this: the person himself will not be destroyed like his works, passing into nothingness, but he will abide in the fire. St. Paul calls this state salvation. . . . For we, too, are accustomed to saying, 'saved in the fire,' with regard to materials that are not directly consumed."³⁰

The scholastic understandings and interpretations which, via the work of Dante (*The Divine Comedy*), have become pervasive in our own sphere have consequences that lead to idolatrous interpretations. For example, the separation of Paradise and Hell into two different places, which occurs because no distinction is made between the created and the uncreated. Similarly, the denial of the eternity of Hell, in the sense of the restoration" of all things or in the sense of a "good God" (*Bon Dieu*). God is truly "good,"³¹ since He offers salvation to everyone. He "will have all men to be saved."³² The words of Christ that we hear at funerals, moreover, are striking: "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me."³³ In addition, the concept of "theodicy" as applied in this case is misleading. Everything is ultimately ascribed to God (He will save or punish), without taking into account synergy (coöperation) as a factor in our salvation. Salvation is possible only within the framework of man's synergy or coöperation with Divine Grace. According to the Divine

Chrysostomos, “The greatest part, indeed nearly everything, belongs to God; yet He has left us a little something.”³⁴ This “something” is our acceptance of God’s invitation. The thief was saved “by using as a key, ‘Remember me!’”³⁵ Equally idolatrous is the idea that God is angry against sinners, whereas God, as we have seen, “is never at enmity.” This is a juridical view of God, which also leads to the understanding of “penances” in Confession as punishments and not as remedies (means of healing).

6. The mystery of Paradise and Hell is also experienced in the life of the Church in the midst of the world. The believer’s participation in Grace is reified in the Mysteries, so that Grace might be activated in our life as we journey towards Christ. Especially in the Holy Eucharist, the Uncreated—Divine Communion—becomes within us either Paradise or Hell, depending on our condition. It is primarily our partaking of Divine Communion that constitutes our participation in Paradise or Hell in the context of history. This is why we entreat God, before Divine Communion, that the Precious Gifts be within us “not unto judgment, or unto condemnation,”³⁶ “not unto eternal punishment.”³⁷ For this reason, partaking of Divine Communion is bound up with the believer’s entire spiritual journey. When we approach for Communion impure and unrepentant, we are punished (burned). Divine Communion becomes inside us “Hell” and “spiritual death,” not, of course, because it is transformed into any such thing, but because our impurity cannot receive it as “Paradise.” Given that Divine Communion is called “the medicine of immortality,”³⁸ there occurs precisely what occurs with any medication. If our organism does not have the necessary capacity to accept it, then the medicine will produce side effects and will kill instead of curing. In this case, it is not the medicine itself that is responsible, but the condition of our organism. It must be said that if we do not accept Christianity as a therapeutic regimen and the Mysteries as spiritual remedies, then we end up transforming Christianity into a religion; in other words, we turn it into a form of idolatry. This, unfortunately, happens most often when we understand Christianity as a “religion.”

Furthermore, the present life is to be evaluated in the light of the dichotomy of Paradise and Hell. “[S]eek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness,”³⁹ Christ advises us. “We do all things in preparation for the next life,”⁴⁰ St. Basil tells the young. Our life must be a continuous preparation for our participation in Paradise, that is, for communion with the Uncreated,⁴¹ which begins already in this world. Hence, the Apostle Paul says: “[B]ehold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”⁴² Each moment of our life is endowed with soteriological significance: either we gain eternity, eternal communion with God, or we lose it. This is why Far Eastern religions and cults which preach reincarnation do mankind a disservice, since

they shift the issue to other (obviously non-existent) lives. There is, however, only one life, in which we are either saved or lost. Thus, St. Basil continues: “We maintain that we must cherish and pursue with all our might those things which conduce for us to this life, while we must disregard those which are of no avail for it as being devoid of value.”⁴³ This is the criterion of Christian life. The Christian constantly chooses that which contributes to his salvation. It is in this life that we either gain Paradise or lose it and wind up in Hell. This is why St. John the Evangelist says: “He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.”⁴⁴

Consequently, the task of the Church is not to “send” man to Paradise or Hell, but to prepare him for the Last Judgment. The work of the clergy is therapeutic, and not moralistic or character-forming in the worldly sense of the term. The essence of life in Christ is preserved in monasteries—provided, of course, that they are Orthodox, that is, Patristic in spirit. The purpose of the cure offered by the Church is not to create “good” and fundamentally “useful” citizens, but citizens of the Heavenly (Uncreated) Kingdom. Such are the Confessors and Martyrs, the true faithful, the Saints.

This, furthermore, is the litmus test of our mission. To what are we calling people? To the Church understood as a hospital or clinic, or to an ideology that is Christian only in name? All too often we seek a secure place in “Paradise” instead of a cure. As such, we are preoccupied with rituals and not with therapy. This certainly does not mean that we should reject worship. But without asceticism (the ascetical life, practical therapy) worship cannot sanctify us. The Grace that flows from it remains inert within us. Orthodoxy does not promise to send man to any kind of Paradise or Hell, but has the capacity, as is evident from the incorrupt and wonder-working Relics of the Saints (incorruption = deification), to prepare man to behold the Uncreated Grace and Kingdom of Christ eternally as Paradise and not as Hell.

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Notes

1. St. Matthew 25:31-46.
2. St. Matthew 25:46.
3. St. Luke 23:42.
4. “Exposition of the Gospel According to St. Luke,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CXXIII, col. 1105B.
5. II Corinthians 12:4.
6. Revelation 2:7.
7. “Commentary on the Apocalypse,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. CVI, col. 529D.
8. St. John 5:29.
9. Cf. St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names*, ch. IV.7, *Patrolo-*

gia *Græca*, Vol. III, col. 701D.

10. Hebrews 12:29.

11. *Ladder*, Discourse 28, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXVIII, col. 1137C.

12. “Homily LIX, ‘On What Is Accomplished in Holy Baptism and On Repentance,’” §13, *Ἑλληνας Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis “Gregorios ho Palamas,” 1986), Vol. XI, p. 498.

13. “Concerning Divine and Deifying Participation,” in *Σύνγραμματα* [Writings], ed. Panagiotes Chrestou, Vol. II (Thessalonike: 1966), p. 145.

14. “Homily, ‘On Not Publishing the Sins of the Brethren,’” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LI, col. 353.

15. “Homily IV, ‘On the Gospel Passage Describing Christ’s Second Coming,’” §12, *Ἑλληνας Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike: Paterikai Ekdoseis “Gregorios ho Palamas,” 1985), Vol. IX, p. 124.

16. St. Luke 16:19-31.

17. “Homily XI on II Corinthians,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXI, col. 478.

18. “Homily IV,” §21, p. 132-134.

19. St. Luke 16:25.

20. St. Luke 16:29.

21. St. Matthew 25:31-46.

22. Compare this with certain related expressions in the Greek language, which is imbued with Orthodoxy: “ὁ ἀθεόφοδος” (“accursed, ungodly,” or “scoundrel, rascal”; literally, “one who has no fear of God”); “δὲν ἔχει Θεοῦ μέσα του” (“he does not have God in him”), etc.

23. Cf. “[Love] seeketh not her own” (I Corinthians 13:8).

24. “How shall it be in that hour...,” as we chant at the Praises on the Sunday of Meatfare.

25. “[Jesus was] grieved for the hardness of their hearts” (St. Mark 3:5).

26. Cf. St. Luke 16:25.

27. I Corinthians 3:13-15.

28. *Εὐθυμίου τοῦ Ζιγαβινοῦ Ἐρμηνεία εἰς τὰς ἸΔ' Ἐπιστολάς τοῦ Ἀποστόλου Παύλου* [Euthymios Zigabenos, Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of the Apostle Paul], ed. Nikephoros Kalogeras (Athens: Typois Adelphon Perre, 1887), Vol. I, p. 215.

29. “Commentary on I Corinthians,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXXII, col. 252A.

30. “Homily IX on I Corinthians,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXI, cols. 75, 79.

31. St. Matthew 19:17.

32. I St. Timothy 2:4.

33. St. John 5:30.

34. “Exposition of Psalm 115,” *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LV, col. 322.

35. Verses at the *Synaxarion* for Great Friday.

36. Second Prayer (St. Basil the Great).

37. Sixth Prayer (St. John of Damascus).

38. St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, XX.2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. V, col. 661A.

39. St. Matthew 6:33.

40. “Exhortation to Young Men About How They May Derive Profit from Greek Letters,” §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXI, col. 565B.

41. Cf. St. John 17:3.

42. II Corinthians 6:2.

43. “Exhortation,” §2, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XXXI, col. 565C.

44. St. John 3:18.