

PARADISE AND HELL IN THE ORTHODOX TRADITION

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On Meatfare Sunday, as we prepare for the commencement of the Holy and Great Lent, we commemorate the Second and Incorruptible Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The expression "we commemorate" confirms that our Church, as the Body of Christ, re-enacts in its worship the Second Coming of our Lord as an event and not just something that is historically expected. The reason is that through the Divine Eucharist, we are transported to the celestial kingdom, to meta-history. It is in this Orthodox perspective that the subject of Paradise and hell is approached.

In the Gospels (Matthew, Ch. 5), mention is made of kingdom and eternal fire. In this excerpt, the kingdom is the divine destination of mankind. The fire is "prepared" for the devil and his "angels" (demons), not because God desired it, but because they are impenitent. The kingdom is prepared for those who remain faithful to the will of God. Kingdom (the uncreated glory) is Paradise. Fire (eternal) is hell (Mt 5:22). At the beginning of history, God invites man into Paradise, into a communion with His uncreated Grace. At the end of history, man has to face Paradise and hell. What this means, we shall see, is further down. We do however stress that it is one of the central subjects of our faith - it is Orthodox Christianity's philosophical cornerstone.

(1) Mention of Paradise and hell in the New Testament is frequent. In Luke 23:43, Christ says to the robber on the cross: Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise. (Lk 23:43). However, the robber also refers to Paradise, when he says: Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. (Lk 23:42). According to St. Theofylaktos of Bulgaria, "for the robber was in Paradise, in other words, the kingdom." The Apostle Paul (2 Cor 12:3-4) confesses (of himself): And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell; God knoweth.) How that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. In Revelations 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 (Rev 27). And Arethas of Caesaria interprets: "Paradise is understood to be the blessed and eternal life." Thus, Paradise, eternal life, Kingdom of God, are all related.

(2) Paradise and hell are not two different places. This separation idea is an idolatrous concept. They instead signify two different situations (ways), which originate from the same uncreated source, and are perceived by man as two, different experiences. Or, more precisely, they are the same experience, except that they are perceived differently by man, depending on man's internal state. This experience is the sight of Christ inside the uncreated light of His divinity, of His glory. From the moment of His Second Coming,

through eternity, all people will be seeing Christ in His uncreated light. That is ... the hour is coming, ... all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. On 5:28-29). In the presence of Christ, mankind will be separated (sheep and goats, to His right and His left). In other words, they will be discerned in two separate groups: those who will be looking upon Christ as Paradise and those who will be looking upon Christ as hell. For our God is a consuming fire.(Heb r2:29).

Paradise and hell are the same reality.

This is what is depicted in the portrayal of the Second Coming. From Christ a river flows forth: it is radiant like a golden light at the upper end of it, where the saints are. At its lower end, the same river is fiery, and it is in that part of the river that the demons and the unrepentant ("the never repentant" according to a hymn) are depicted. This is why in Lk 2:34 we read that Christ stands as the fall and the rising (resurrection) of many. Christ becomes the resurrection into eternal life, for those who accepted Him and who followed the suggested means of healing the heart; and to those who rejected Him, He becomes their demise and their hell.

There exist numerous patristic testimonies: St. John of the Ladder says that the uncreated light of Christ is "an all-consuming fire and an illuminating light." St. Gregory Palamas observes: "Thus, it is said, He will baptize you by the Holy Spirit and by fire: in other words, by illumination and punishment, depending on each person's predisposition, which will bring upon him that which he deserves." Elsewhere, The light of Christ, "albeit one and accessible to all, is not partaken of uniformly, but differently." Consequently, Paradise and hell are not a reward or a punishment (condemnation), but the way that we individually experience the sight of Christ, depending on the condition of our heart. God does not punish in essence, although, for educative purposes, the Scripture does mention punishment. The more spiritual one becomes, the better he can comprehend the Scripture and our traditions. Man's condition (clean-unclean, repentant unrepentant) is the factor that determines the acceptance of the Light as "Paradise" or "hell."

(3) The anthropological issue in Orthodoxy is that man will eternally look upon Christ as Paradise and not as hell; that man will partake of His heavenly and eternal Kingdom. And this is where we see the difference between Christianity as Orthodoxy and the various other religions. The other religions promise a certain "blissful" state, even after death. Orthodoxy however is not a quest for bliss, but a cure from the illness of religion, as the late Fr. John Romanides so patristically teaches. Orthodoxy is an open hospital within history ("spiritual infirmary" according to St. John the Chrysostom), which offers the healing (catharsis) of the heart, in order to finally attain "theosis"-the only destination of man. This is the course that has been so comprehensively described by Fr. John Romanides and the Rev. Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, Hierotheos (Vlachos); it 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) and the Church's reason for existence. St. Gregory Palamas (in his 4th Homily on the Second Coming) says that the

pre-eternal will of God for man is "to find a place in the majesty of the divine kingdom" - to reach theosis. That was the purpose of creation. And he continues: "But even His divine and secret kenosis, His god-human conduct, His redemptory passions, and every single mystery (in other words, all of Christ's opus on earth) were all providentially and omnisciently pre-determined for this very end (purpose).

(4) The important thing, however, is that not all people respond to this invitation of Christ, and that is why not everyone partakes in the same way of His uncreated glory. This is taught by Christ, in the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus (Luke, Ch. 16). Man refuses Christ's offer, he becomes God's enemy and rejects the redemption offered by Christ (which is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit-it is within the Holy Spirit that we accept the calling of Christ). This is the "never repentant" person referred to in the hymn. God "never bears enmity," the blessed Chrysostom observes; it is we who become His enemies; we are the ones who reject Him. The unrepentant man becomes demonized, because he has chosen to. God doesn't want this. St. Gregory Palamas says: "...for this was not My pre-existing will; I did not create you for this purpose; I did not prepare the pyre for you. This undying pyre was pre-fired for the demons who bear the unchanging trait of evil, to whom your own unrepentant opinion attracted you." "The co-habitation with mischievous angels is arbitrary (voluntary)." In other words, it is something that is freely chosen by man.

Both the rich man and Lazarus were looking upon the same reality, i.e., God in His uncreated light. The rich man reached the Truth, the sight of Christ, but could not partake of it, as Lazarus did. The poor Lazarus received "consolation," whereas the rich man received "anguish." Christ's words, that they: "have Moses and the prophets" - for those still in the world - signifies that we are all inexcusable. Because we have the Saints, who have experienced theosis and who call upon us to accede to their way of life so that we too might reach theosis like they did. We therefore conclude that those who have chosen evil ways-like the rich man-are inexcusable.

Our stance towards our fellow man is indicative of our inner state, and that is why this will be the criterion of Judgment Day, during Christ's Second Coming. This doesn't imply that faith, or man's faithfulness to Christ is disregarded; faith is naturally a prerequisite, because our stance towards each other will show whether or not we have God within us. The first Sundays of the Triodion preceding Lent revolve around fellow man. On the first of these Sundays, the (seemingly pious) Pharisee justifies (sanctifies) himself and rejects (derogates) the Tax-collector. On the second Sunday, the "elder" brother (a repetition of the seemingly pious Pharisee) is sorrowed by the return (salvation) of his brother. Likewise seemingly pious, he too had false piety, which did not produce love. On the third (carnival) Sunday, this stance reaches Christ's seat of judgment, and is evidenced as the criterion for our eternal life.

(5) The experience of Paradise or hell is beyond words or senses. It is an uncreated reality, not a created one. The Franks created the myth that Paradise and hell are both created realities. It is a myth that the damned will not be looking upon God; just as the "absence of God" is equally a myth. The Franks had also perceived the fires of hell as something created (e.g. Dante's Inferno). Orthodox tradition has remained faithful to the

Scriptural claim that the damned shall see God (like the rich man of the parable), but will perceive Him only as "an all-consuming fire." The Frankish scholastics accepted hell as punishment and the deprivation of a tangible vision of the divine essence. Biblically and patristically however, "hell" is understood as man's failure to collaborate with Divine Grace, in order to reach the "illuminating" view of God (Paradise) and selfless love. Consequently, there is no such thing as "God's absence," only His presence. That is why His Second Coming is dire ("O, what an hour it will be then," we chant in the Laudatory hymns). It is an irrefutable reality, toward which Orthodoxy is permanently oriented: I anticipate resurrection of the dead

The damned - those who are depraved at heart, just like the Pharisees - eternally perceive the pyre of hell as their salvation! It is because their condition is not susceptible to any other form of salvation. They too are "finalized" - they reach the end of their road - but only the righteous reach the end of the road as saved persons. The others finish as damned. "Salvation" to them is hell, since in their lifetime, they pursued only pleasure. The rich man of the parable had "enjoyed all of his riches." The poor Lazarus uncomplainingly endured "every suffering."

The Apostle Paul expresses this (1 Cor 3:13-15): 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. The righteous and the unrepentant shall both pass through the uncreated "fire" of divine presence, however, the one shall pass through unscathed, while the other shall be burnt. He too is "saved," but only in the way that one passes through a fire. Efthimios Zigavinos (a 12th century theologian) indicates: "God is fire that illuminates and brightens the pure, and burns and obscures the unclean." And Theodoritos Kyrou (regarding this "saving") writes: "One is also saved by fire, being tested by it," just as when one passes through fire. If he has an appropriate protective cover, he will not be burnt? otherwise, he may be "saved," but he will be charred!

Consequently, the fire of hell has nothing in common with the Frankish "purgatory," nor is it created, nor is it punishment, or an intermediate stage. A viewpoint such as this is virtually a transferal of one's accountability to God. The accountability is entirely our own, whether we choose to accept or reject the salvation (healing) that is offered by God. "Spiritual death" is the viewing of the uncreated light, of divine glory, as a pyre, as fire. St. John the Chrysostom in his 9th homily on Corinthians I, notes: "Hell is never-ending... sinners shall be judged into a never-ending suffering. As for the 'being burnt altogether,' it means this: that he does not withstand the strength of the fire." And he continues: "And he (St. Paul) says, it means this: that he shall not be thus burnt also-like his works-into nothingness, but he shall continue to exist, only inside that fire. He therefore considers this as his 'salvation.' For it is customary for us to say 'saved in the fire,' when referring to materials that are not totally burnt away."

Scholastic perceptions-interpretations, which, through Dante's work (Inferno) have permeated our world, have consequences that amount to idolatrous views. An example is the separation of Paradise and hell as two different places. This has happened, because they did not distinguish between the created and the uncreated. Also, the denial of hell's eternity, with their idea of the "restoration" of everything, or the concept

of a "good God" (Bon Dieu). God is indeed benevolent (Mt 8:17), since He offers salvation to everyone. (He wants all to be saved. .. per I Tim 2:4) However, the words of our Lord, as heard during the funeral service, are formidable: I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just. On 5:30).

Equally manufactured is the concept of "theodicy," which applies in this case. Everything is finally attributed to God alone (i.e., if He intends to redeem or condemn), without taking into consideration man's "collaboration" as a factor of redemption. Salvation is possible, only within the framework of collaboration between man and Divine Grace. According to the blessed Chrysostom, "the utmost, almost everything, is God's; He did however leave something little to us." That "little something" is our acceptance of God's invitation. The robber on the cross was saved, "by using the key request of remember me..."

Finally, idolatrous is also the perception of a God becoming outraged against a sinner, whereas we mentioned earlier that God "never shows enmity." This is a juridical perception of God, which also leads to the prospect of "penances" in confessions as forms of punishment, and not as medications (means of healing).

(6) The mystery of Paradise-hell is also experienced in the life of the Church in the world. During the sacraments, there is a participation of the faithful in Grace, so that Grace may be activated in our lives, by our course towards Christ. Especially during the Divine Eucharist, the uncreated-Holy Communion-becomes inside us either Paradise or hell, depending on our condition. But mostly, our participation in Holy Communion is a participation in Paradise or hell, throughout history. That is why we beseech God, prior to receiving Holy Communion, to render the Precious Gifts inside us not as judgment or condemnation, or as eternal damnation.

Participation in Holy Communion is thus linked to the overall spiritual course of the faithful. When we approach Holy Communion uncleansed and unrepentant, we are condemned (burnt). Holy Communion inside us becomes the "inferno" and "spiritual death." Not because it is transformed into those things of course, but because our own uncleanness cannot accept Holy Communion as "Paradise." Given that Holy Communion is called "medication for immortality" (St. Ignatius the God-bearer, 2nd century), the same thing exactly occurs as with any medication. If our organism does not have the prerequisites to absorb the medication, then the medication will produce side-effects and will kill instead of heal. It is not the medication that is responsible, but the condition of our organism. It must be stressed, that if we do not accept Christianity as a therapeutic process, and its sacraments as spiritual medication, then we are led to a "religionizing" of Christianity; in other words, we "idolatrize" it. And unfortunately, this is a frequent occurrence, when we perceive Christianity as a "religion."

St. Basil the Great tells us: "Everything we do is in preparation of another life." Our life must be a continuous preparation for our participation in "Paradise" -our community with the Uncreated. And everything begins from this lifetime. That is why the Apostle Paul says: "Behold, now is the opportune time. Behold, now is the day of redemption." (2 Cor 6:2).

Every moment of our lives is of redemptive importance. Either we gain eternity, the eternal community with God, or we lose it. Consequently, we can now understand why oriental religions and cults that preach reincarnations are injuring mankind; they are

virtually transferring the problem to other, (nonexistent of course) lifetimes. The truth is, however, that only one life corresponds to each of us, whether we are saved or condemned. This is why St. Basil the Great continues: "Those things therefore that lead us towards that life, we need to say should be cherished and pursued with all our might; and those that do not lead us there, we should disregard, as something of no value." This is the criterion of Christian living.

A Christian continuously chooses whatever favors his salvation. We gain Paradise or lose it and end up in hell, in this lifetime. As 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. (Jn 3:18) Consequently, the work of the church is not to "send" people to Paradise or to hell, but to prepare them for the final judgment. The work of the Clergy is therapeutic and not moralistic or character-shaping, in the temporal sense of the word. The essence of life in Christ is preserved in monasteries - naturally wherever they are Orthodox and of course patristic. The purpose of the Church's offered therapy is not to create "useful" citizens and essentially "usable" ones, but citizens of the celestial (uncreated) kingdom. Such citizens are the Confessors and the Martyrs, the true faithful, the saints. However, this is also the way that our mission is supervised: What are we inviting people to? To the Church as a Hospital and a Therapy Center, or just an ideology that is labelled "Christian?"

More often than not, we strive to secure a place in "Paradise," instead of striving to be healed. That is why we focus on rituals and not on therapy. This of course does not signify a rejection of worship. But, without asceticism (spiritual exercise, ascetic lifestyle, act of therapy), worship cannot hallow us. The Grace that pours forth from it remains inert inside us. Orthodoxy doesn't make any promises to send mankind to any sort of Paradise or hell; but it does have the power-as evidenced by the incorruptible and miracle-working relics of our saints (incorruptibility=theosis)-to prepare man, so that he may forever look upon the Uncreated Grace and the Kingdom of Christ as Paradise, and not as Hell.

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