

The Orthodox Understanding of Death

&
the Western Rite Services
for the Departed



Death is a much misunderstood thing in our world. Some see it as the ultimate defeat, some see it as a tragedy without meaning, some desire death as oblivion. Many people devalue human life and think little of death; others deny the very existence of death and live as though they will never die. But as Christians, and specifically as Orthodox Christians, we have Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers to help us understand the mystery of death, to understand and to prepare rightly.

First of all, we know that death was not a part of God's creation. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and created to have communion with God for all eternity. In the Book of Wisdom we read that "God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity"(2:23). But death came into the world by the disobedience of mankind, for as God is the source of all life, turning from God means turning away from life. All that is evil and corrupt in the world seeks to lead us away from God and into bondage to sin and death. Therefore, as St. John of Damascus teaches, death is the result of our own choice and of evil, not a punishment or act of God. Like a wild beast, ravaging and destroying men's lives, the good and the bad alike are caught up in the destruction we have let loose in the world (The Orthodox Faith, Bk. 2, 28 and Bk 3, 1). Furthermore, death now provides a merciful escape from what would otherwise be an eternity of brokenness and pain in this fallen world. St. Ambrose of Milan, writing after the death of his own brother in the fourth century said, "God did not ordain death in the beginning of things: but He gave it to us as a remedy when that damnable sin brought toil and tears into human life... Deathlessness is no blessing but only a weariness if grace does not transfigure it."

God is gracious. Despite all that we had done, despite our rebellion, God in His eternal love for us, did not abandon us, did not destroy us. Out of His love beyond measure, the Father gave His only Son whom He loves, to come among us and live our life, to show us how to live as we were created to live. And then to make things right, the only- begotten Son of God even took our death upon himself. The only man who never deserved to die, who never turned away from God in any way - Christ, our God, took our death upon himself, willingly. As the Fathers teach us, when the fullness of God entered into death, death was too small a thing to contain God, and the bonds of death were burst asunder - power of death destroyed. This is what we celebrate in the Icon of the Resurrection as we see Christ breaking down the doors of Hell, setting free Adam and Eve and their children. Death no longer has ultimate power over the children of God. As we believe that Christ rose from the dead and now lives for all eternity, so we believe that He desires to share this risen and eternal life with those who love him.

We rightly say that death is not the end, but a point of transition, the beginning of the life to come. At the time of death our soul is separated from our mortal and physical body. We believe that the soul continues to live, awaiting the resurrection at the last day. In the Creed we proclaim our belief in "the resurrection of the Body and the life of the world to come." This does not mean a resuscitation of the broken and imperfect bodies we have now, but our bodies will be made new - strong, spiritual, glorified, and incorruptible. Who we are as a person is defined by the union, the combination of our soul and body; therefore at the resurrection we shall be a whole person once more, body and soul, by the grace of God. As citizens of the Kingdom, our bodies will be changed to be like Christ's Body: "But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

It is the teaching of our Church that at the time of death each soul undergoes a partial judgment, based on the person's life, their words and deeds, what they have done and what they have left undone. Based on this judgment the soul will begin to experience a foretaste of his eternal state of blessedness or of torment that will follow the final judgment at the second coming of Christ. St. Gregory the Theologian, writing in the 4th century in Constantinople, said that "Every good and God-beloved soul... when it has

been released by death from the body with which it was united... immediately experiences that joy and pleasures which it shall enjoy in full measure in the future... and though immediately after death the enjoyment is small, after, when it shall again receive its body at the resurrection of the dead, it shall enjoy blessings in perfect measure."

We speak of the departed as having fallen asleep; their lives have changed, not ended, and they await the final resurrection. This is not a sleep of oblivion, nor does it mean that the souls are unaware of or indifferent to us. Using the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:20ff), Metropolitan Hierotheos explains this state of being: "The Rich Man in Hades was concerned about his relatives who were living, although he could not help them... the souls of those who have fallen asleep remember the people with whom they were connected in life, they are concerned about them... Through God, the souls of the saints are aware of our condition, because they have love and are in communion with God. They hear us, they receive our prayers and pray to God for us" (Life after death, p. 91). In this intermediate state it is our duty and our joy to pray for the departed. The memorial services and the prayers of the Church help them and comfort them; St. Gregory the Great spoke often concerning the benefit of remembering the departed at Mass. In Christ, we are one family, living and departed. We who are now in this world pray for those who have entered the next and in some way we help them, even as we know that they are aware of us and pray for us - for we all live in Christ. Likewise we ask the saints to pray for the departed, even as we ask the saints to pray for us here, as the saints of God are closer to the Divine Presence.

The services of the Church for the departed (according to Western Rite Orthodox usage) continue the Church's ministrations to the sick. As death approaches (or if any person is thought to be in danger of death, such as before a serious operation), the priest is summoned to administer the Sacrament of Unction. In Extreme Unction, the priest, after prayers, confession (when possible) and absolution anoints the "seats of the senses", the eyes, ears, nostrils, lips, hands and feet with Holy Oil, while praying "Through this holy Unction, and His most tender mercy, the Lord pardon thee whatsoever thou hast done amiss by seeing," etc. Holy Communion, Viaticum (Latin for "provision for a journey"), is given when possible to strengthen the soul with grace for the journey into eternity. The beautiful Order for the Commendation of a Soul is to be said as death approaches, including an invocation of the prayers of all the saints for the sick person. Additional prayers are provided, for comfort of the living and the departing, to be said while waiting for the time of death. Then, at the time of death, the priest prays, "Unto thee, O Lord, we commend the soul of thy servant, N., that being dead to the world he may live to thee: and whatsoever sins through the frailty of his earthly conversation he hath committed, do thou by the pardon of thy most merciful goodness cleanse away. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." And thus at the time of death, our hope in our good and merciful God is declared, commending the soul of the departed and giving solace to the living.

It is very helpful for a person's funeral preferences to be made clear in writing, particularly when family members are not Orthodox and do not know our teaching and customs. Arrangements can also be made in advance with funeral homes and cemeteries, sparing family members from these decisions at a difficult time. Expensive funeral home "packages" are not necessary and the focus needs to be on preparing for the services of the Church. After death, the body, which God has given as the vessel for an earthly life, is reverently prepared for burial. Cremation, the intentional destruction of the body, is not permitted in the Orthodox Church.

In The Order of Funerals, the priest meets the body as it is brought to the entrance of the Church. The Body is sprinkled with Holy Water, as it was by the waters of Holy Baptism that the deceased was cleansed of the stain of sin, adopted as God's own child, and given the grace to live the Christian life. Psalm 130 ("Out of the deep...") and Psalm 51 ("Have mercy upon me...") are sung as the body is brought

into the Church. The casket is covered by a pall (usually marked with a cross) and the clergy are vested in black (or white if the deceased is a small child). The black, symbolic of our sorrow, is a reminder that death entered the world through sin and disobedience; the white used for children (up to the age of reason, usually marked at age seven or so) is a reminder that the child, who has not chosen sin, certainly lives with Christ. It is customary to place a crown of flowers or sweet herbs on the head of a child, signifying the integrity and purity of their lives and the Cross carried before the coffin is without staff, signifying that the child was not required to take his own Cross to follow Christ. The casket is taken to the middle of the Church and large candles are lit and placed around the casket. The faithful are invited to keep vigil until the Requiem Mass is celebrated, and psalms should be read or sung during this time (sometimes the entire psalter is recited). St. John Chrysostom said that “If we are occupied with the funeral solemnities of the departed, David is first, last, and middle.” The Vigil of the Dead may be sung, consisting of Vespers, Matins, and Lauds (also known as the dirge, from the Latin dirige from Psalm 5:8 “Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness...”), but more often only Vespers will be offered. When possible, the body remains in the Church overnight, until the Requiem Mass is celebrated the following morning.

When the Mass is offered for the departed it is called a Requiem Mass, named for the opening words of the Introit in Latin, “Requiem aeternam...,” or “Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord: and let light perpetual shine upon them.” The introit sets the tone of the Mass, as we ask for these blessings upon the departed. The Requiem is normally offered on the day of burial, on the 3rd, 7th, and 30th days following, annually on All Souls Day, and it may be offered on the anniversary of death. Many parishes will offer a monthly Requiem (usually on a Saturday so that many may attend) to remember departed loved ones who died in that month. The Requiem is a Mass offered more for the departed than for the living; the intercessions are on behalf of the departed and the blessing is not given to the living. Even the ceremonial actions of the Requiem display this as the clergy and acolytes do not bow to one another, and (in addition to the body of the departed), only the Celebrant of the liturgy is censed.

The Sequence hymn, *Dies irae*, proclaims in prose, both our mourning, sorrow, and fear surrounding death, and our hope based in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The *Dies irae*, while clear and to the point, is not without hope as some have charged. Anyone who actually pays attention to the full text will see the balanced Christian view of death: sorrow for sin, fear of honest judgement, but also hope in Christ, “Thou the sinful woman savest, thou the dying thief forgavest, and to me a hope vouchsafest...”

The Absolution of the Dead follows at the end of the Mass. In a manner reminiscent of John 5:24 (“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”), the celebrant prays that the departed will not be judged, “for in thy sight no man living will be justified.” Then while the choir sings the Responsory asking for deliverance from death, the celebrant sprinkles the body with Holy Water and censes it with incense, both symbolic of our prayers for the departed ascending to God and showing that this body, made and given by God, has been the temple of the Holy Spirit. The celebrant then prays for forgiveness for the departed saying, “Absolve, O Lord, we beseech thee, the soul of thy servant N., from every bond of sin: that in the glory of the resurrection he may be raised up amid thy Saints and elect unto newness of life...” As the body is taken from the Church to the grave an antiphon of great beauty and comfort is sung, “Into paradise may the Angels lead thee: at thy coming may the Martyrs receive thee, and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem. May the Choir of Angels receive thee, and with Lazarus, once poor, mayest thou have eternal rest.”

At the cemetery, the priest blesses the grave, if not previously blessed, and the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79) is sung. Brief prayers conclude the service. The Church’s final words over the grave are “Rest eternal grant unto him, O Lord. And may light perpetual shine upon him. May he rest in peace. Amen.” Additional prayers are appointed for the priest to say as he returns to the Church.

The ministry of the Church then turns to those who remain in this life, mourning the loss of their loved one. Grief is the normal and expected response to the experience of loss (the loss of someone or something that is precious to us). Resolution of our grief depends on our capacity to grieve and to cope with the loss. Most people move through phases of grief: first, shock and disbelief; then a developing awareness of what has happened (this phase may include both anger [at God, self, and/or the departed] and a sense of guilt [for things done or undone, or simply for still being alive]); and the final phase is assimilation, moving on with a life that has changed with the loss of the departed. The liturgical and family life of the Church helps a person move in a natural and healthy manner, through their grief toward assimilation. The services surrounding the death and burial, the “mercy meal,” the regular memorial services, the on-going life with family and friends (who share our sense of loss and can talk with us about the presence we have lost) all help to support and move a person through the grieving process. If a person does not work through his grief he may become incapacitated (to some degree) and all future relationships will be affected. When we are able to work through our grief we are free from bondage to the loss, our lives become readjusted so they may continue, new relationships are formed, and (as Christians) we may come to a deeper understanding of the resurrection, knowing that Christ came to save us all (living and departed) from the power of sin and death.

Death is not the end, but a beginning. Our present life is a preparation for the next. In Romans, chapter 6, St. Paul tells us “if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.” Having died to sin in our baptisms, we may live with Christ, both now and forever. St. Paul continues “For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” In this way we prepare for the life to come, by living with God here and now, by turning from sin and living the life Christ calls us to live. Our belief in the Resurrection must inform our understanding of death; we are a people of hope because we believe in the Resurrection. The early Christians did not fear death, but saw it as a thing to be welcomed and looked forward to. They looked at death as a release from sin, sickness and sorrow and the opportunity to be with Christ forever. We rightly mourn the loss of our departed loved ones, but we should not feel sorry for them, unless they have rejected God with all their heart, and even then we can simply commend them to the mercy of our loving God.

Now, today, we are preparing for our own deaths by striving to live as Christ lived. We pray for those who have already departed this life, and with great joy we proclaim that “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs, bestowing life.” Thanks be to God!

*Adapted from a Doctor of Ministry paper by Fr. Nicholas Alford,
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