
THE ORTHODOX ESCHATOLOGY

THE FULFILMENT OF MAN'S LIFE IN

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S GLORY AND LOVE

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Abstract

The 'eschatological' dimension of the Church begins with Christ's Resurrection. This is the beginning of the end. Eternal Heaven and eternal hell are the consummation of man's relationship with God here and now. Heaven and hell are not simply to be understood as two different places. They instead signify two different ways of experiencing the 'uncreated energies' of God. Or, more precisely, they are the same experience, except that they are perceived differently by man, depending on man's internal state. Paradise and hell are not only a reward or a punishment, but primary the way that man will individually experience God's love in the eternal life.

Keywords: Cappadocian Fathers, Paradise, hell, God's love, Last judgment

1. Preliminaries - the Orthodox Eschatology - the teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that God created man a being capable of communion with Himself and which is called upon to grow within this communion, in this dialogue of love with his Creator during his life on Earth and in the future life. The Person of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, is not just the fulfilment of this communion between man and God, but also the paradigm, the model and the power of its appropriation by all believers. The Resurrection of our Saviour gives meaning not only to man's life but also to the end of his life, because, to Christians, death is just a transition to the plenitude of eternal life. This plenitude of life is the fulfilment of a great purpose, that of intimate unification of the Son of God and humanity. Man enjoys this plenitude spiritually first after being found righteous at the particular judgment and then also bodily with his resurrected body and freed from corruption at the final judgment [1].

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2. The Particular Judgment as the revealing of man's relationship with God

The Orthodox Church teaches that the human soul, after leaving the body, is subject to the rightful judgment of God and has to account for the life it lived on earth. If that was a life in communion with God through the obtained virtues, it would be fulfilled in this communion in the eternal life, enjoying the happiness of Heaven [2]. If that life ended through a refusal of opening itself to the communion of love with God, it would continue as an unhappy existence in hell. "Being a question of communion, the judgment of God, through which some will be given eternal happiness, and others eternal unhappiness, must be understood as an act in which God, Who is open to any person created through communion, regretfully finds that some persons did not accept or became due to their deeds incapable of accepting this communion and thus remain unhappy as a result of their own freedom." [1, p. 370]

The teaching of the Orthodox Church maintains that every man goes to his particular judgment wearing the coat of virtue or that of sin that he had put on before his death and the new life he begins can only be a continuation and completion of the previous one.

The reward or punishment, namely the fate comprised in the sentence the soul receives after the particular judgment is neither *complete* nor *final*. It is not complete because it is not given to the entire human nature. It is given only to the soul, not to the body. The soul acted on earth together with the body. Both are responsible for what it did on Earth, good or bad. The body was the soul's manifestation in the world. The soul did everything together with the body and thus they should receive together their joy or sorrow. And because the soul and body will be reunited at the Second Coming then man will receive his full punishment or happiness in his entire nature. Until then, souls suffer their punishment or enjoy their reward only in part. The soul's fate, after the Particular Judgment, is not final because, with regard to the less sinful, this could be changed for the better. Sinners will go away definitely "to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25.46) only after the final judgment. Therefore, only then the final fate will be established for ever. The sentence of the Particular Judgment cannot be final due to the fact that only at the end of time man can be judged as a whole, taking in account also the effects of his deeds upon his contemporaries or posterity.

The patristic tradition provides evidence of the existence of the Particular Judgment. The Holy Fathers tried to describe in detail the reality of Particular Judgment and according to their teaching, which can be found in the hymns and prayers of the Church, the particular judgment is done in the following way: the soul, after its separation from the body, faces judgment accompanied by angels and demons. The soul goes to several toll-houses, accompanied by angels and demons, where its past is analysed. At each of these toll-houses an account is demanded for particular sins. The toll-houses are spiritual, not material, because everything what is said about them refers to the soul, which is spiritual, itself.

Concerning this spiritual reality of the toll-houses, Saint Theophan the Recluse writes: “No matter how absurd the idea of the toll-houses may seem to our ‘wise men,’ they will not escape passing through them. What do these toll-gatherers seek in those who pass through? They seek whether people might have some of their goods. What kind of goods? Passions. Therefore, in the person whose heart is pure and a stranger to passion, they cannot find anything to wrangle over; on the contrary, the opposing quality will strike them like arrows of lightning. ...The toll-houses are frightful and the demons will come to each toll-house with their seductive temptations. They will present something deceptive and seductive, according to the kinds of passions, to the soul as it passes through one after the other. When, during the course of life, the passions have been banished from the heart and the virtues opposed to them have been planted, then no matter what seductive thing you might present, the soul, having no kind of sympathy for it, passes by it, turning away from it with disgust. But when the heart has not been cleansed, the soul will rush to whatever passion the heart has most sympathy for; and the demons will take it like a friend, and then they know where to put it. Therefore, it is very doubtful that a soul, as long as there remain in it sympathies for the objects of any passion, will not be put to shame at the toll-houses. Being put to shame here means that the soul itself is thrown into hell.” [3]

This teaching expresses the truth that immediately after leaving the body, the soul has to realize and account for its life on Earth and to face the consequences of its earthly life from all points of view. The teaching about the toll-houses is nothing but a try to describe with details the manner in which the soul will be judged right after his death.

3. The state of the souls after the Particular Judgment

After the death the soul continues to live. Not for an instant does it cease to exist. The external, biological and earthly life ends with death, but the soul continues to live on. The soul is the very existence, the centre of all the energies and thoughts of the human being. The soul moves and gives life to the body. After its separation from the body it continues to live, to exist and to have its own substance to have awareness.

The teaching of the Orthodox Church Fathers makes a distinction between the state of the soul after the first judgment and that one after the Final Judgment. After the personal judgment the state of the souls is not definitive, they only foretaste the joy or the mourning which they will have after the universal judgment.

The Roman Catholic Church abandoned this ancient teaching of the Church fathers with the belief that the soul right after the personal judgment receives all the happiness or all the punishments for the good or bad deeds. An exception is made by the souls who suffer in the Purgatory for a while to enter, through this automatic method, in the joy of Paradise. The difference between the happiness and unhappiness of man after the first and consequently after the

Final Judgment is for the Roman Catholic eschatology in the partaking also of the body on this joy or punishment. Therefore, the Final Judgment is only a festal end of the world, an occasion to show to all God's rightness and man's madness.

On the other extreme, some of the protestant theologians gives all the importance to the Final Judgment, minimizing the personal judgment, because of the belief that after the death the souls are destroyed together with the body and then both will resuscitate at the end of time, or because another belief that the souls after the death enter in a kind of sleep, an anaesthesia till the second coming of the Lord [4]. Both opinions have no biblical support, and all the miracles of resurrection of the people narrated in the Holy Scripture and moreover, the Gospel narration of the miracle of the holy Transfiguration of the Lord (Mathew 17.1-9), as well as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31) verify that those who have fallen asleep continue to live and to maintain full consciousness. Saint Dorotheos of Ghaza (6th century) summarizes the teaching of the early Fathers in this way: "For as the Fathers tell us, the souls of the dead remember everything that happened here - thoughts, words, desires - and nothing can be forgotten. ... What he did against virtue or against his evil passions, he remembers and none of this is lost. In fact, the soul loses nothing that it did in the world but remembers everything at its exit from this body." [5]

As one can see, the Orthodox teaching of the Church fathers underlines that the soul is immortal and continues to live after the death. After bringing the man into existence God does not want that his creature returns into non-existence or that it abandons the relationship with Him. The souls, which after the personal judgment will be found capable and have acquired in this earthly life all the necessary 'skills' to enjoy the communion with God will be placed in what the Scripture defines as 'Paradise'. In opposition to them, those souls which have denied this personal loving relationship with God will be placed in the company of the demons, the state which is usually called as 'Hell'. God does not destroy the beings who deny Him, because He respects their liberty and He shows His love even to those who are in hell, holding them into life. Even the eternal hell speaks about the eternal value of man's liberty. God doesn't destroy the sinner, but loves him and keeps him alive, because life is a gift and the sign of the relationship between God and his creature. Saint Isaac the Syrian says: "The souls in the hell will be punished by the punishment of love... That means that they will feel that they have mistaken the love of God, and this is the greatest punishment... The love of God actions in two manners: it becomes suffering in the souls who have denied it, and joy in that who have benefit from it." [6]

Saint Marc of Ephesus shows that only having the light of the Holy Spirit the souls departed from this life can see the glory of God in the afterlife. This theoria of God will be different from one soul to another according to the spiritual abilities acquired in the earthly life. "Because the souls will not receive the whole happiness nor the whole punishments, says the same holy father, the

power of the prayers and of the mystical sacrifice of the Liturgy helps that souls who lived piously, and having not yet achieved the perfection they receive more and more from the divine love, but they still are not enjoying the whole happiness that will be at the end of the time.” [7]

4. The Last Judgment as man’s entering in the eternal relationship with God

The Nicaea Creed witnesses for the second coming of Christ who will “come to judge the living and the dead”. This second coming is different from the first through its nature and purpose. Our Lord came the first time in humiliation, the second time He will come in all His glory. He was judged by men the first time, but the second He will be the judge.

The New Testament speaks several times about the second coming of the Lord and about the future general judgment using the expressive parables, like that of the good seed and the weeds (Mathew 13.24-30), the net that was thrown into the sea and gathered every kind of fish, the ten virgins, the talents (Mathew 13.47-50, 25.1-13, 14-30). In the words addressed to the Disciples before His venerable passion, the Lord referred at length to the universal judgment and from all quotations and especially from chapters 24 and 25 from the Gospel of Matthew some general information can be gathered. Our Lord, Jesus Christ said that His second coming will be preceded by certain signs which will tell that it is soon to happen. These signs are [2, p. 280]:

1. The Gospel will be preached to all peoples. “And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mathew 24.14). But the Gospel does not tell us that all people will receive it, although it will be preached in the whole world. Sometime will pass between the preaching of the Gospel to all peoples and the second coming. This is a fact as God does not say that the end, namely His second coming, will follow immediately after the preaching of the Gospel. Only God knows how much time will pass since then.
2. The Jewish people will convert to Christianity. The prophets prophesized this and Paul reminds us of it: “Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the Lord and to his blessings in the last days.” (Hosea 3.5) “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.” (Romans 11.25-26)
3. The coming of Enoch and Elijah. They will come back on Earth before the second coming of our Lord to preach Christ to people. Antichrist will oppose, fight them and kill them (Revelation 11.3-7).
4. The coming of the Antichrist, namely the pure evil. Antichrist means opponent adversary of Christ. According to the Holy Scriptures, this name refers to all the adversaries of Christ or to a certain person who will appear before the end of the world and will find different ways to fight Christ. His

power will end when the Lord comes (2 Thessalonians 2.3-4, 2.8; 1 John 2.18).

5. The apostasy of certain Christians (1 Timothy 4.1-2), persecutions, wars, starvation, plague, earthquakes, signs in the sky (Sun and Moon eclipses etc.), false prophets (Matthew 24.4, Mark 13.7-13, Luke 21.9-19), vices spread among people, and they will be proud, disobedient to their parents, hypocrite, full of hatred, wicked, and they will love all devilish things (2 Timothy 3.1-5). All the above have always been and will be on Earth. Therefore, they are not signs that the second coming is going to happen soon. God wants to make us aware that all these have to happen before the end of the world.

The Fathers of the Church, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, wrote about the events announced in the Gospel and explained them with great details. The very reality of the Second coming of the Lord and of the final judgment is one of the beloved themes of Saint John Chrysostom. He describes it with these words: "Then the whole sky will open and the gates of those arches will open wide and the only begotten Son of God will descend, escorted by thousands, and tens of thousands of angels, archangels, Cherubim, Seraphim and the other powers. The Lord will descend with such great glory that the Sun, the Moon and every type of light will recede, being outshined by His light. That presence will be so fearful and glorious that not only everything, but also 'the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Mathew 24.29), troubled by surprise." [8]

Saint Symeon the New Theologian describes with this words the final judgment: "God will place before the sinful Patriarchs the holy Patriarchs, such as John Chrysostom, John the Merciful, Gregory the Theologian, Saint Ignatius. Before the sinful Metropolitans He will place the holy Metropolitans, Basil the Great, Gregory the Wonder-worker, Saint Ambrose, Saint Nicholas and will say to them: Did you not also live your life in those places where they believed in me and served me faithfully? Did you not sit on their thrones? Why did you not imitate their works? (...) Why did you not fear to hold and to eat me, who am pure and immaculate, with unclean hands and with even more unclean hearts? Thus, Fathers will be condemned by fathers; slaves and free men by slaves and free men; the rich and poor by the rich and poor; the married by the married; the unmarried by the unmarried; and simply stated, each sinner on that fearful day of judgment will see before him the person who was similar to him and will be condemned by him in the eternal and that inexpressible light (...). And when the sinners of the world see in the Kingdom of Heaven the righteous of the world, and the sinful kings see righteous kings, and the rich and the warned see rich and married saints, and all those sinners that will be in hell will see those like them but in the Kingdom of Heaven, then indeed they will be put to shame and will be without excuse." [9]

Summarizing all the biblical and the patristic references concerning the second coming of the Lord and the final judgment some remarks can be made:

1. The Final Judgment will be: universal, absolute, supreme and frightening.
At the second coming, after the resurrection of the dead, our Lord will

judge all people that have ever lived on Earth. That is why this judgment is termed universal and it is different from the personal judgment, which will take place right after the death. At this Final Judgment also all evil spirits will be judged. The good spirits, the angels will not have to face judgment. They will be present but not to face judgment but to assist the Great Judge (Matthew 25.31, 24.31). The Virgin Mary will not be judged as well, because her holiness is greater than that of angels and she has been raised above resurrection and judgment.

2. The Final Judgment will be solemn and public, as it will be held in front of the whole world and it will be absolute and supreme because the sentence will be eternal and without any right of appeal. For the bad, this judgment will be frightening because they anticipate their sentence.
3. The date of this very important day of the second coming and of the Final Judgment is not known. It is for the benefit of man that God has not revealed the day of His second coming and of the Final Judgment, because so all everybody has to be awake and to be prepared when the Lord comes (Matthew 24:42). In the interpretation of the prophetic word, "To me, God, every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (Isaiah 45.23), Saint John Chrysostom urges the Christians to have a vigilant attitude because, "Each one of us, will give an account of himself to God. For this reason, Christian, be always awake, ready for battle; be alert; prepared to do spiritual battle as you see the Lord of all sitting upon the tribunal (of judgment)." [10]
4. At the Final Judgment the entire human being, body and soul will be judged and not only the good or bad deeds, but also the effects of them will be taken in account. During our life on Earth we affect one another for the better or for the worse. These effects of these influences can only be seen in the end and thus we all have to come back to life together and be judged together, to be able to see the effects of our influencing the others.
5. The Judge of all humankind is God, but He exercises His judgment through the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. That is why the Lord, assigns the judgment to the Father (Matthew 6.4-8) or to Himself (John 5.22). This judgment is the judgment of the entire Holy Trinity. The Son has the leading role, because "the Father ... has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (John 5.22, Acts 10.42). Or, as Paul says, God will judge the world through Jesus Christ (Acts 17.31, Romans 2.16). We believe this and we witness for it in our prayers during the divine services (vespers, matins, Liturgy), when we say: "A Christian ending to our life, painless, unashamed, peaceful, and a good defence before the fearful judgment seat of Christ, let us ask." The angels will participate in the judgment, but not as judges, but as executors of the God's will and as witnesses of the unbiased judgment. The Apostles will be also present (Matthew 19.28) and everybody will be able to see them, that they will be honoured by Christ as a reward for their virtuous lives and they will be assistants and impartial witnesses to the judgment.
6. Not only humans will face judgment, but also the evil spirits (2 Peter 2.4).

7. Every person will be judged from his conscience. “The fearful face of the Lord will compel us to tell the truth, writes Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, for each one of us will appear before the Judge clothed with his sins or his righteousness...Every of your prayers and psalmodies is written down to be remembered. Written down to be remembered is every (deed of) charity, (...) every fast, (...) every marriage kept well (honourable)” and every ‘restraint’ that was practiced for the sake of God. “The primacy of crowns» in these records goes to virginity and chastity, for you will shine like an angel”. “Written down also is every greed, (...) every fornication, (...) every perjury and blasphemy and every abuse of drugs, every theft and every murder; all these then are written down.” [11] When everybody’s situation is ascertained, the righteous Judge will pass the supreme and final sentence for all. The sentence will be composed of two parts: one referring to the righteous and one to the sinners. The first one will read: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). And the second: “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). The sentence will be motivated in such a way that everyone will see justice has been made. The reasons for which the righteous are rewarded with the kingdom of heaven are mainly the acts of mercy and of showing the fruits of God’s love: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25.34-40) The sentence of the wicked will be motivated through the fact that they did not do any of the above (Matthew 25:42-45). The sentence having been passed, the sinners “will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).
8. The criterion of the Final Judgment will be the practice or the non-practice of the love, which has his base in the capacity to see the image of God in each soul. The different forms of manifestation of love towards God and towards man are the virtues and through the virtues each man arrive from image to likeness of God, becoming a viviant image of God, a brother of Christ, a vessel of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the judgment will be made by the Son, Who gave in a supreme manner a human image of God in Himself, and He wants to recognize His image in each soul, to see the likeness of God fulfilled in each man [1, p. 453].

The virtues are the distinctive marks of the image of God in man's soul and their essence is Christ Himself [12]. Through virtues the man becomes "another Christ" (Romans 8.29), and grows "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:" (Ephesians 4.13). At the final judgment Christ, our Lord will choose that souls who are like Him, who are in the communion of love with Him. The Paradise is this communion of love between God and man. It starts in the earthly life and will be fulfilled in the future one.

In the same time, the last judgment is the supreme manifestation of the value given by God to the mystery of the human freedom. If we have had a god who could, or would not judge the choices of our liberty, we would deprive of the appreciation of a supreme authority, the only guarantee and support of the dignity of the free orientation of our will. The existence of the final judgment means a serious and responsible relationship of communion between God and man.

Creating man as a person with rationality and liberty God has assumed a divine risk: to be denied by his own creature, to be refused in His calling for communion. This is the explanation of the existence of the eternal hell, the existence of the eternal negation and deny of the divine love, but also the explanation of the final decisions of our Lord.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa considers that after this final decision the separation between the souls will be very easy, because, as he says, each person receives 'a distinctive mark', according to his deeds and to his opening to the communion with God. The 'attributes of evil or of virtue' will then place a certain pronounced characteristic to the image of each person, it is the image of God who has become likeness with God through virtues. It seems to me, adds Saint Gregory, that what will happen then occurs in a similar manner in this life also, namely, the external appearance of the person reveals and manifests "the hidden disposition of the soul" [13].

Saint Basil observes that the sins are like dirt (impurities) on the soul, which is "devastating its natural beauty" [14]. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem teaches something similar. He writes: "How does the shepherd separate the sheep from the goats? Certainly not from books. For 'the wool identifies the sheep, while the coarse hair identifies the goat'. In a similar way the righteous person, cleansed of his sins with repentance and confession, has his deeds from now on as pure wool and the garment of the soul remains spotless. On the contrary, the sinner is found to have 'coarse hair', as Esau, 'who had much dense hair and was foolish of mind'." [11, p. 197-198]

5. Conclusions

The Orthodox Church sees the judgment of God as a final act in which everybody through the enlightened conscience will recognize if during the life on earth has accepted or not a personal relationship with God. The afterlife is a matter of communion with God. The abilities for this new life brought to

mankind by the Sacrifice and Resurrection of our Lord has to be obtained on earth through a sacramental but also ascetical participation of the life of the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church.

The sentence of God's judgment will be not arbitrary, and not according to some impersonal law, but it will be an act in which God recognizes those who has lived according to His commandments and became alike Him, preserving inside themselves even in the earthly life all the light and joy of the communion with Him, and those who did not follow Him and were and are deprived of the happiness of being in communion with Him, the source-Person of all divine and human love.

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