

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 13: The Judgment, Heaven and Hell

(The Life, Chp.5)

Over the past weeks we have discussed basic concepts of the classical, historical, ancient Orthodox Christian Faith which now lead us to the topic of “The Judgment, and Heaven and Hell”:

- 1) That God has revealed Himself to be the eternally existing One, Who at the same time is Three Divine Persons, sharing one Divine Nature (or, Essence), one Divine Will, one Divine Power, etc. (The Three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—always have existed as One God.)
- 2) That the LORD—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—created this present universe from nothing (“*ex nihilo*”). (It did not always exist.)
- 3) That God made man—male and female—in His Image, and offered to mankind the possibility of infinite growth in the “Likeness” of God. (Man has the potential to become more and more like God, by drawing ever closer in love to the Lord and by being united with God by sharing His Energies, not His Essence.)
- 4) However, mankind (Adam and Eve) chose to try to become like God without God’s help—selfishly choosing to try to find “life” in the pleasures and fruits of this world (idolatry), rather than drawing eternal Life from the LORD, the Life-giver. Having broken communion with God, and estranged himself from God—the Life-giver—as a consequence, man became subject to death and corruption. This state he passed on to his off-spring.
- 5) Man lived out his life, and died. The soul separated from the body, which itself decomposed into its molecular components. The souls of men continued to exist, but apart from God’s Presence, in the place that the Hebrews termed “Sheol” or “Hades.”
- 6) God—fully loving His creation and not willing that man (whom He had made in His Image) should perish—sent His only-begotten Son to enter the human race, in order to save it, and to draw it back into communion and union with Himself.
- 7) Jesus Christ, by dying on His cross, descended into Hades which He spoiled with the Divine Glory of His Presence, and then He rose again, having destroyed the power of death (and the Devil who had that power), and offering to all humanity the **gift of eternal life** and the possibility of enjoying the glorious loving Presence of the LORD eternally in Heaven.

- 8) After ascending into Heaven in His human flesh, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will come again in Glory at the End of the world, to raise all humans from their graves and to judge the living and the dead.

What is this “Judgment?” Who will be there? What do we as Orthodox Christians believe about “Heaven” and “Hell”?

For starters, we begin with the Lord Jesus’ own teaching.

John 5:25-29

²⁵Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.

²⁶For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, ²⁷and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which **all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.**

Matthew 25:31-46

31 “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the **throne of His glory**. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him, and **He will separate them one from another**, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. 33 And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 35 for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

37 “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

41 “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 42 for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 43 I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

44 “Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ 45 Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ 46 And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

When Christ returns in the flesh, He will demonstrate that He truly conquered Death and has the power of life: **He will raise all humanity**—every human that ever lived—from the grave. Death will be no more. Life will reign.

Jesus Christ will also demonstrate His love for the entire human race: **every soul** that ever lived will be reunited to a raised, glorified, immortal, eternal **body**.

Because God is love, and because God—in Christ—conquered death, God will give the gift of eternal life to everyone.

But there is a catch: for some, it will be a **resurrection of eternal bliss and life**, while for others, it will be a **resurrection of eternal condemnation**.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas explains that all people will share in God’s gift of eternal life, but not all people will be able to enjoy that life. As Creator, God will fix and restore our human nature, but **how we have lived our life on earth will determine our ability to enjoy the next eternal life**.

“The Kingdom and vision of God and union with Christ are privileges which depend on willingness. They are thus possible only for those who have been **willing** to receive them and have **loved** them and **longed** for them.” (*The Life*, p.57)

St. Maximus explains how God is **not arbitrary** in any of His actions, but is pure love. He offers His love equally to all. (See Matthew 5:45; and Luke 6:35-36)

“God is the sun of justice, as it is written, Who shines rays of goodness on simply everyone. The soul develops according to its free will into either wax because of its love for God or into mud because of its love of matter. Thus just as by nature the mud is dried out by the sun and the wax is automatically softened, so also every soul which loves matter and the world and has fixed its mind far from God is hardened as mud according to its free will and by itself advances to its perdition, as did Pharaoh. However, every soul which loves God is softened as wax, and receiving divine impressions and characters it becomes the dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (*The Life*, p.56)

The Sheep:

Some people will have spent their lives drawing close to the Lord. They will **value** Him and the things of Heaven. They will be **treasuring** up in their hearts eternal treasures—righteousness, peace, joy, love, goodness, mercy, kindness, self-giving, and self-control (Romans 14:17, Gal. 5:22-23). The Kingdom of God was planted and imprinted on their

souls during their life. “The Kingdom of Heaven is within you” (Luke 17:21). They are **filled with the Holy Spirit**. The flame of God’s love is in their hearts. The Holy Spirit gave them spiritual abilities and faculties to enjoy the heavenly life—a life that they **already began** to experience **while still on** the earth. When these people meet Christ on Judgment Day, they will run to Him and He will be pleased with them. They will be able to see and enjoy Christ’s Presence, because He already **lives in them** and **His Kingdom** and the flame of His love is **already in them**. They will be granted entrance into God’s Heavenly Kingdom, which was made for those who love Him.

The Goats:

Other people will have spent their lives trying to find **treasure** and **pleasure in the things of this world**. Their years were spent selfishly piling up physical treasures on earth. When these die, they suddenly will see that earthly riches cannot follow you to the next life. Only spiritual riches count in heaven—kindness, love, mercy, etc. These people will see that they are **spiritually bankrupt**. They will not have the spiritual abilities and faculties to enjoy the Presence of Christ. Their selfish disposition of their own hearts—formed by years and years of selfish decisions, words, thoughts, and deeds, will render these people incapable of receiving and responding to God’s love. On that Day, Christ’s **selflessness** will confront their **selfishness**, and they will look for somewhere to hide in their shame but there will be none. They will be denied entrance into the Heavenly Kingdom (and will go into the Lake of Fire instead) because in their life they **denied** the entrance of the Kingdom of God into their hearts.

Simply standing in the Presence of Christ Who loves us on Judgment Day will be our judgment -- our bliss or our torment.

Christ will **fill all things**. (see 1 Corinthians 15:28, and Ephesians 1:23)

There will be **no place to hide from Him**,
no place to hide from the Truth, the Reality of the Great I AM.

“It is His presence that will be heaven or hell.” (*The Life*, p. 68)

St. Paul wrote, “For our God is a **consuming fire**” (Hebrews 12:29). St. Isaac the Syrian said that the fire of hell (the Lake of Fire) is the love of God. Paradise, too, he

said, **is the love of God**. For those who love God and are revealed to have God already in their hearts, the Divine Fire of God’s Glory will warm and bless them. But for those who have little or no love for God in their hearts, the love of God will burn them like fire, and **they will be separated from the saints**, and will go into God’s eternal Lake of Fire, which to them will be experienced as outer darkness. The eyes of their soul will not be able to process that glorious light. And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth—great regret. Death and Hades itself will be thrown into the Lake of Fire. (Rev. 20:14)

In this Presence of Christ, all humanity will be **separated into two camps**:

- those who love God and are **filled with the love of God** are the “sheep”
- and those who don’t love God and who are **void of the love of God** in their lives are the “goats”.

On that Day, **the innermost treasure of our hearts will be revealed**—what *we really turned into* throughout all the days of our life **will be revealed**. Our actions, deeds, words, and even thoughts throughout our entire life **will judge us** at that moment. In the End, we will all be given that which we desire most in our heart of hearts when God “will render to every man **according to his deeds**”. (see Romans 2:6-8)

“How we live in the life to come depends on **how we live in this life**. If in our deepest heart we love God and seek His Kingdom, we shall surely find it. But if we are wrapped up in ourselves instead, we shall be **unable** to enjoy the life that God grants freely to all.” (*The Life*, p.59) Not being able to enjoy the body and eternal life that Christ gives to us will be great pain and torment.

Thus, we see that God is **not** the “egotistical tyrant” who arbitrarily throws some into a cosmic furnace, while choosing to save a few lucky ones for heaven. We see that God is fair. **He gives His love equally to all**. And in the end, it is **His love that burns or blesses us, depending upon our spiritual disposition**. **God gives His same love to all, but it acts in a “two-fold way, punishing the sinners and giving joy to the righteous.”** (*The Life*, p.67)

St. Maximus concludes: On Judgment Day, “**the same love of God, the same energy will fall upon all men, but it will work differently.**” (*The Life*, p.67)