

## Q&A with Fr. Panagiotis

*I am curious why we have memorial services. Do we believe that persons that have gone to Hell can still be taken to Heaven through our prayers? If this is so, who introduced this to our belief? Is it found anywhere in the bible? Why do many Christians (e.g. Protestants) not do this?*

Our patron saint, Saint Paul, provides us with a biblical example of prayer for the dead in his second letter to Timothy. He writes "The Lord grant Mercy to the household of Onesiphorus...the Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that day" (2 Timothy 1:16,18). Onesiphorus is dead, and in his letter, Paul prays both for the dead man and his household. Here in this biblical example we see two parties involved in memorial prayers, the departed and the family of the departed.

I will take the easier of the two first. The Church, like Saint Paul, offers memorial prayers to bring consolation to the family of the one who has fallen asleep in the Lord. Some of the prayers of the memorial service are specific to the person who has passed. Yet if we also pray "May their memory be eternal" we clearly have the family in mind. We are also reminded that the person has "fallen asleep" and awaits the general resurrection of the dead on the day of judgment. This reminds the family that although parted now, we will be reunited on the day of judgment. Of course, these points are true regardless of there being a memorial service or not. However, it goes to show that a secondary emphasis of the memorial service is to provide comfort and hope to the family.

The primary emphasis is to provide prayers directly for the person who has passed away. We do not make much of a distinction in the Church between those who are alive and those who are dead. This is because we understand that Christ is life (John 14:6). All those united to Christ, partake in His everlasting life, regardless of biological life or not. Therefore, praying for the dead is no different than praying for the living. You are praying for a member of the body of Christ. That membership is not contingent on biological life.

The answer then, to what do those prayers affect is similar for the living and the dead: God's mercy, and drawing the person closer to God. As I have written about before, if we remember that the gates of hell have been torn down by Christ, those in Hell are there because they have chosen not to walk out in an embrace of Christ. I have also written that the day of Judgment should be conceived of as a continuation of that freedom. Before the judgment throne, entrance into the kingdom is granted to those who choose to love God in eternity, and closed to those who choose to reject Him. Why have a judgment if the case has already been decided? Thus, we hope that our prayers, especially for those who have died and chosen hell, will soften their hearts so that they may choose life on the day of Judgment.

For those who have lived righteously in Christ and found their rest in Heaven before the judgment, we must remember St. Paul's words to the Corinthians, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Again, life in Christ is based in a relationship of love, and love is never exhausted. Therefore, even those in the Kingdom of God grow "from glory to glory" deepening their love of God and becoming more and more holy in His presence. So memorial prayers also benefit the saved, by helping them to grow in love of God.

The question about why other Christians do not practice memorials or prayers for the dead is curious to me. I know that many denominations provide funerals with biblical readings and prayers and yet reject the practice of continued prayer outside the context of the funeral. I see that as incongruent. Beyond pointing out this inconsistency, I do not really have a deep enough knowledge of the practices of other denomination to comment more intelligently about the reasons for this.