

## Prayers For the Dead

### Why do we (how can we) pray for the dead?

First: We are one living body in Christ. Death does not break the communion we have in Christ:

**From “Prayers for the Dead” By Fr. Stephen Freeman** (May 21, 2016) “...Salvation, the full and complete restoration of communion with God and our complete healing, is not a private matter. We are not saved alone, for “alone” is the very antithesis of salvation. *Communion* is how we exist... true existence, both in this life and the next, is marked by communion, both with God and with others.

This is the very heart of our salvation. That the Church prays for those who have died is the abiding confession that death does not destroy our communion with one another. That our prayers are of “benefit” for those who have died is the abiding confession that our communion is real and effective. That we ask the prayers of the saints is the abiding confession that those who have finished the course are of benefit to us...The funeral marks only the beginning of a new communion. In Orthodox practice, prayers are offered on the third, ninth and fortieth days after death, and every year on the anniversary of our parting. Funeral services conclude with the ancient hymn, “Memory eternal!” In which the Church prays that God will forever remember the departed. To be remembered by God is nothing less than life eternal...In all of these things, the reality of our eternal participation in one another and together in the life of God is foremost.”

### **From a letter by the missionary priest Makary Glukharev, quoted by Metropolitan Ware:**

“In Christ we live and move and have our being. Whether we are alive or dead, we are all in Him. It would be more true to say: We are all alive in Him, for in Him there is no death. Our God is not a God of the dead but of the living. He is your God, He is the God of her who has died. There is only one God, and in that one God you are both united. Only you cannot see each other for the time being. But this means that your future meeting will be all the more joyful; and then no one will take your joy from you. Yet even now you live together; all that has happened is that she has gone into another room and closed the door...Spiritual love is not conscious of visible separation.” (see *The Inner Kingdom*, by Metropolitan Ware, p.33).

Second: God hears our prayers in His time—eternal, the ever-present Now—not in our time.

### ***What happens to us after death?***

Death is not God’s will or plan for us, and is overcome, trampled, defeated by Christ. But this also means it is transformed by Him into a way of return, and can therefore be called a blessing. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware says (from *The Inner Kingdom*, p. 32): “We see death as unnatural, abnormal, as contrary to the original plan of the Creator, and so we recoil from it with grief and despair. But [in and through the work of Christ] we see it also as part of the divine will, as a blessing, not as a punishment. It is an escape from the *impasse*, a means of grace, the doorway to our re-creation. It is our way of return...” Thus we hear in the funeral service: “*The death which You have endured, O Lord, is become the harbinger of deathlessness; if You had not been laid in Your tomb, then would not the gates of Paradise have been opened; wherefore to him (her), now*

*gone from us give rest, for You are the Friend of Mankind.” And: “Blessed is the way wherein you walk today, for there is prepared for you a place of rest.”*

We know that after death we enter into a condition of preparation as we await the return of Christ, when we will all be raised, to the resurrection of life, or to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:29). This condition has been described in various ways by different Church Fathers, and these descriptions remain in the category of theological speculation rather than Church doctrine. What is agreed, however, is that our condition now after death is not our final condition, that we await the Second Coming and the final judgment, and that this period now is but a foretaste of what will be. Yet those who die in Christ truly experience rest in Him, and His abiding presence, as we know from Scripture and from the services of the Church.

We have been promised that we will be with Christ: Jesus tells us: (John 14: 1-6): “Let not your hearts be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And where I am going you know, and the way you know.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”

*From the Triasagion service for the dead: O God of spirits and of all flesh, You trampled upon death and abolished the power of the devil, giving life to Your world. Give rest to the soul(s) of Your departed servant(s) (Name) in a place of light, in a place of green pasture, in a place of refreshment, from where pain, sorrow, and sighing have fled away. As a good and loving God, forgive every sin he (she, they) has (have) committed in word, deed, or thought, for there is no one who lives and does not sin. You alone are without sin. Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your word is truth.*

In discussing the condition of the soul after death, we all seek to have more knowledge. It is natural for us to fear death, and our uncertainty contributes to that fear, so we seek clarity about it. However, let us be cautious in thinking about the specifics of what happens after death. We lose our way when we want a precise description, and become focused on our status, our condition, our rewards and punishments after death. In fact, we really go in the wrong direction if we take Jesus's parables and statements about meeting our death and try to parse out the 'facts' about the state of the soul after death, because we turn our thoughts inward to concerns about 'me'. We have missed His point, which is not: "worry about what will happen to you" but rather "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR." When Jesus talks about our death and judgment, He is not giving us a 'map' or 'program' of how to secure a successful afterlife, but **how to live**, and tells us in multiple ways that what matters, here and now and for all eternity, is LOVE. This is what makes life meaningful and transforms death. All Christ's parables highlight how salvation and love and, of course, faith, are intertwined. Love transfigures the afterlife into eternal life. St. Mother Maria of Paris expresses this: “The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I: 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.' To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need. . . . I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.”