

Chapter 13: Life after Death

*“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.”*¹

This chapter will examine the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy on life after death.

In short, Orthodox theology teaches that each person possesses an immortal soul. Indeed, in this area, Eastern Orthodoxy agrees with the Bible. Yet, where Orthodoxy departs from God’s Word is in its belief of the soul’s destiny after death. As a person’s soul leaves the human body, he can wind up in one of two places depending on whether the man was baptized as an Eastern Orthodox believer or not. If he were baptized, his soul travels through Heaven and gives account for his sins at heavenly demonic customs offices (also called “toll houses”). If he is not baptized Eastern Orthodox, he is immediately sent to Hell.

The first part of this chapter will examine what God’s Word teaches about life after death. The second part of this chapter will examine in detail teachings about the afterlife in Eastern Orthodoxy. The objective reader will recognize that, yet again, Eastern Orthodoxy teaches in utter contradiction of God’s Holy Scripture.

The Holy Bible records the spiritual truths that God has progressively revealed to people through the ages. During the history of the Old and New Testaments, God provided people progressive revelation. In other words, over time God chose to reveal through later generations more details about subjects that their forefathers had previously not known. Such revelation began with limited and modest teachings in the Old Testament, and ended in the New Testament with more comprehensive revelation. Such is the case with, for example, the resurrection of the dead (discussed in the next chapter). Namely, unlike the New Testament account of the resurrection, the Old Testament provides us with limited insight into this future event. The question about the afterlife also slowly reveals the God of the Bible, especially in the New Testament Scriptures that speak about this issue much more than the Old Testament.

What did the Old Testament, from the creation of the world until the birth of Jesus Christ, tell us about what people believed about life after death? Let us analyze this question.

The Old Testament Revelation of Life after Death

As mentioned earlier, the early teaching of Old Testament Scripture about the fate of man after death is somewhat vague. The Old Testament contains various statements that indicate the possibility of an afterlife. However, at that time death was an event about which no one rejoiced, except those who were in terrible mental anguish or physical pain, as in the case of the righteous Job (Job 3:11-13, 21-22). Some Old Testament

¹ Hebrews 9:27.

figures understood the state of the human soul after death as a stay in a dark abyss where the disembodied spirits roam both of the righteous and of the wicked. On the other hand, many other biblical texts describe the state of the dead as a dream in which the deceased body rests in the dust of the earth awaiting a bodily resurrection.

To begin a more detailed study of what the Old Testament says about life after physical death, you should first look at the creation of the first man which occurred on the sixth day of God's creation. Here is the Biblical account:

*“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”*²

Paul the apostle explains that any believer who has in faith received Christ's teachings has the Holy Spirit inside himself. The Scriptures teach that the audience of this epistle was the Corinthians, a group whom Paul considered as small children (in terms of spiritual maturity). If you read the whole epistle, you will see that believers in Corinth were no special spiritual elitists or “friends of God”. In fact, some of them even suffered physical illnesses due to the great sin practiced by some. Paul is addressing this very group of Corinthian Christians. He admonishes them that they are the temple of the Holy Spirit. (As a consequence, they should abstain from sins that grieve the Spirit.)

Therefore, since Scripture clearly says that all believers belong to the Church of God, not just some special “saints,” it logically follows, according to Orthodoxy's teaching, that the dead bodies of every single Christian throughout history should be incorruptible and wonder-working. Only the bodies of non-Christians should be subject to decay. However, as we will see, the Holy Scripture never ever teaches that a believer's body after his death remains incorruptible. ((However, there could exist a few exception situations in which either natural conditions fossilize a dead body or else deliberate man-made means are employed to preserve a corpse.) The psalmist David, whom the Scriptures testify to be a true man of God,³ wrote the following words:

*“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”*⁴

We see that the Lord formed man's body from the dust of the earth and then "breathed" into his nostrils the breath of life. In other words, the Lord began the process of life by breathing air into man's lungs. At that moment, all the other organs and tissues became alive. The man became a living being.

According to the teachings of the Lord in Genesis, when a person dies, his physical body returns to the earth from which it was created, and his spirit returns to God who gave him life.

² Genesis 2:7.

³ See 2 Samuel 5:10; 1 Kings 9:4, 11:4; Psalms 89:3, 20-9, 35-7.

⁴ Psalm 16:10.

After man's transgression in eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, God pronounced the following words to Adam:

*“In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; **For dust you are, And to dust you shall return.**”*⁵

From the moment of the Fall, the first human being began to age until, according to the Creator's words, he finally returned to the dust from which he was taken.

The wise king Solomon was deeply reflecting on the purpose of human life on earth. He concluded that the fate of people was identical to the fate of animals (in terms of their mortality and the return of their bodies to the earthen dust):

*“For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: **all are from the dust, and all return to dust.**”*⁶

However, Solomon did not merely stop with the departure of all living creatures “to one place” as their corpses are to be buried in natural earthen graves. Solomon called on all readers of the book of Ecclesiastes to trust in the Lord while he still has time (until his death), because afterward, time will run out. He said:

*“Rejoice, O young man, in your youth,
And let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth;
Walk in the ways of your heart,
And in the sight of your eyes;
**But know that for all these
God will bring you into judgment.**
Therefore remove sorrow from your heart,
And put away evil from your flesh,
For childhood and youth are vanity....
**Then the dust will return to the earth as it was,
And the spirit will return to God who gave it.**”*⁷

Godly readers of God's revelation in the Old Testament religious people understood the existence of the mysterious metaphysical world where the spirits of the deceased live. That place was called “Sheol” or the realm of the dead.

The Old Testament Scriptures mention several times the word “Sheol.” Some foreign translations use the words “grave” or “hell”. The word “grave” is not the best choice,

⁵ Genesis 3:19. Author's emphasis.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 3:19-20. Author's emphasis.

⁷ Ecclesiastes 11:9-10;12:7. Author's emphasis.

because it inaccurately characterizes Sheol as the ground beneath the earth.⁸ This is not what is meant in the context of the Bible. For this reason, the verses below cite the word as simply “Sheol”.

After his ten brothers sold Joseph to the Midianite traders and deceived his father that he was devoured by a wild beast, the bereaved Jacob cried that he would go down with his dead son to Sheol with a sad heart. He expressed his belief that his dead son Joseph was already in Sheol, that is, the habitat of deceased souls:

*“Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, ‘For I shall go down **into Sheol to my son** in mourning.’ Thus his father wept for him.”⁹*

More than a decade later, when Joseph became the governor of Egypt, his brothers came to him to buy food, though they did not recognize his true identity. He ordered them to bring back their youngest brother, Benjamin, whose mother was Rachel. When their father heard the request, the aged Jacob reacted in this manner:

*“My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow **to Sheol**.”¹⁰*

The same word “Sheol”, the world of the dead, is mentioned in several places in the book of the righteous Job. Verses such as Job 7:9-10 and Job 17:13-16 mention Sheol as a place where he expects to go after his death. This place is dark and filled with silence, from which no one can depart. According to the description of Sheol which we find in this book, we might conclude that Job describes it as the ultimate destination for all of humanity:

*“Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? **For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; Then I would have been at rest With kings and counselors of the earth, Who built ruins for themselves, Or with princes who had gold, Who filled their houses with silver.**”¹¹*

⁸ The word "Sheol" in the Bible is mentioned 64 times in the King James Version of 1611. Of these instances, the word “Sheol” is translated as “grave” 31 times, the word "hell" in 30 places, and the word "pit" or "abyss" 3 times. But what is certain is that the word “Sheol” does not conform to the word “Hell” in the New Testament sense of the term "Gehenna", which alludes to the Lake of Fire as a place of eternal torment. See: *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, Lexical Aids to the Old Testament*, 1778, 1799, 1816.

⁹ Genesis 37:34-5. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁰ Genesis 42:38. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹ Job 3:11-15. Author’s emphasis.

*“As the cloud disappears and vanishes away, So he who goes down to the grave does not come up. He shall never return to his house, Nor shall his place know him anymore.”*¹²

*“If I wait for Sheol as my house, If I make my bed in the darkness, If I say to corruption, ‘You are my father,’ And to the worm, ‘You are my mother and my sister,’ Where then is my hope? As for my hope, who can see it? Will they go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we have rest together in the dust?”*¹³

Although it would appear that Job thought about death with uncertainty and anxiety, the knowledge of God's truth, to which Job came during his blessed life, made a big distinction between it and the surrounding Gentiles. Job feared God and obeyed His will. He believed in a future bodily resurrection from the dead and eventual meeting with God face to face. Job believed in something about which his contemporaries had no idea.

*“For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; And **after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another.** How my heart yearns within me!”*¹⁴

The descent into Sheol is mentioned several hundred years later in connection with the death of rivals to Moses and Aaron who had rebelled against their God-given authority:

*“And Moses said: ‘By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive **into Sheol**, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD.’ Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive **into Sheol**; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly.”*¹⁵

What is important to point out is the fact that Sheol in the Old Testament represented a place in the depths of the earth (underground) in which the disembodied spirits of people went, not their bodies. The theologian Dragan Simov in his textbook for Bible study comments on this topic:

¹² Job 7:9-10.

¹³ Job 17:13-6. Author's emphasis.

¹⁴ Job 19:25-7. Translator's emphasis.

¹⁵ Numbers 16:28-33. Author's emphasis. The Scriptures that describe some “going down alive into Sheol” certainly describe a situation in the opposite order of usual events. In fact, it was common for someone to die on the physical surface of the earth and then, only after the funeral, did his soul go down to Sheol. Yet, in this instance, Moses' opponents went to the underworld alive (although, in fact, they died immediately after falling into the abyss that opened up beneath them). It is quite certain and well understood that it was impossible for someone “in the flesh” (still alive) to descend to Sheol, which was reserved for the souls of the deceased.

“The souls of the dead go **to Sheol**, not their bodies. Sheol is not a grave. The Hebrew word for grave is ‘**keber**’. Nowhere in the Old Testament does it say that the body goes **to Sheol**. ‘**Keber**’ is mentioned 37 times in the Old Testament, always with the meaning of ‘grave’, and ‘**Sheol**’ with the meaning of the ‘habitat of souls’. **Sheol** is never described as a place under the earth, but ‘**keber**’ in 32 places is described in such a manner. Yet again, this proves that ‘**keber**’ means grave and ‘**Sheol**’ means the place to which the soul departs in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, one can never take another man into ‘**Sheol**’, but a man can lead another to ‘**keber**’. 33 places describe the interment of a body into a physical grave, but a soul is never sent to the grave. Also, nowhere do we find a man digging ‘**Sheol**’, but we do find 6 examples of men digging ‘**keber**’ in Scripture. Again, this demonstrates that one can dig a physical grave, but not a place for the soul. Scripture never says that someone can touch ‘**Sheol**’, but 6 places in the Old Testament suggest that a person could touch ‘**keber**’, confirming that a man can touch a physical coffin or grave, but he cannot touch ‘**Sheol**’, where souls go.”¹⁶

Namely, when Scripture speaks of the death of Abraham, Jacob, David and many other figures from this period, both positive (servants of God) and negative (godless people), it mentions that they were "gathered to his fathers" or "he slept with his fathers." This translation is supposed to mean that their immortal spirits (souls) go to the same place where the souls of their ancestors dwell.

Regarding God’s servants, heroes of the faith such as the Patriarch Abraham and King Josiah of Judah, the Lord said they were “gathered to their fathers.” Here are some Scriptures:

*“Now as for you, **you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.**”¹⁷*

*“Surely, therefore, I will **gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place.**”¹⁸*

*“Then Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and **was gathered to his people.**”¹⁹*

*“I am to be **gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite...**’ And when Jacob had finished commanding his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed and breathed his last, and **was gathered to his people.**”²⁰*

¹⁶ Dragan Simov, *What Says the Scriptures*, (Alpha and Omega: Belgrade, 1996) 98. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁷ Genesis 15:15. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁸ 2 Kings 22:20. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁹ Genesis 25:8. Author’s emphasis.

²⁰ Genesis 49:29, 33. Author’s emphasis.

*“So David rested with his fathers, and was buried in the City of David.”*²¹

*“And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD; he did according to all that his father Uzziah had done... So Jotham rested with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the City of David his father. Then Ahaz his son reigned in his place... Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and he did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his father David had done... So Ahaz rested with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers in the City of David. Then Hezekiah his son reigned in his place.”*²²

*“And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father David had done... So Hezekiah rested with his fathers. Then Manasseh his son reigned in his place... Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Hephzibah. And he did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel... So Manasseh rested with his fathers, and was buried in the garden of his own house, in the garden of Uzza. Then his son Amon reigned in his place.”*²³

So, after his physical death, every single person, whether they obeyed or rebelled against God, went to the same place, which is described as a place “with his fathers”. The existence of “Sheol” as a place to which departed souls of the Old Testament went is very evident from Scripture.

However, since the enemy of mankind, the Devil, knew that God had created man to have an immortal soul (or spirit), he invented pagan religions that were designed to fool people in terms of their fate after death. Further studies will describe various pagan beliefs about the afterlife that conflict with God’s revelation of truth through Moses and His other servants.

Pagan Beliefs about the Afterlife and God's Warnings to the People of Israel

Recall the life and conversion of Abraham in the second chapter of this book. After the Great Flood, it took only a few generations after the great God's punishment of the wicked before people immersed themselves in false gods. Belief in the eternal state of the soul is found in many different forms in various cultures. Different concepts of Heaven and Hell exist among the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, as well as in religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism to this day. Here is what ancient Egyptians believed about life after death:

“All written testimonies from ancient Egypt reveal that Egyptians did not share a common and stringent doctrine about eternal life and how one can find it. It seems that Egypt had always been facing a kind of dualism... Thus two basic

²¹ 1 Kings 2:10. Author’s emphasis.

²² 2 Kings 15:34, 38; 16:2, 20. Author’s emphasis.

²³ 2 Kings 18:3; 20:21; 21:1-2, 18. Author’s emphasis.

‘teachings’ regarding belief in the afterlife arose. One teaching consisted of the ancient belief in the One thing is very old belief in life after death for the material world, and the second, also ancient and quite developed, held that the spiritual part of man not only survives death, but the soul can also attain divinity.”²⁴

“According to Egyptian beliefs, the man had some sort of spiritual counterpart - an abstract figure that, after the death of the body, became completely independent. This counterpart could dwell among the gods and visit the grave. Therefore, the Egyptian name for man’s spiritual aspect is most commonly translated as ‘spirit’ or ‘double’. Living Egyptians would offer sacrifices of food and drink so that the ‘spirits’ could have something to eat in the afterlife... The part of a man that enjoys life in the spiritual realm is called the ‘ba’. The ‘ba’ connotes the aspect of a person that is great and noble, and is usually translated as 'soul'. Although the ‘ba’ is usually considered to be immaterial, one often encounters claims that it is a spiritual entity takes the form of a bird with a human head.”²⁵

Our purposes are not to go into great depth about the spiritual beliefs of various other cultures. At this point, let us briefly look at the spiritual beliefs of the ancient Semites. They were descendants of Noah's son Shem and the pagan ancestors of Abraham. According to the professors of religion Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, the ancient Semites believed that the cosmos was divided into three parts: Earth, Heaven, and the Underworld of the Dead.

“The ancient Semites pictured the world like a big house with a three-tier structure: the upper kingdom of the gods (Heaven), the central human world that the gods gave us (Earth), and the lower part which consisted of a huge rock located deep below the Earth's surface (Underworld or Sheol)... In contrast to the upper world of the gods, **Sheol was the abode of the dead and the hellish deities**. Although the ancients portrayed **the grave as a dark and quiet place**, we must not think of it as hell. **A deity called Mot, ‘Death’, presided over the dead and the gods of hell**. Since human beings live between Heaven and Sheol, they could expect activity in the upper and lower worlds to affect the earth.”²⁶

“People who live on the Earth - between the upper and lower worlds – can address the inhabitants on either level to seek help for their earthly problems.”²⁷

The pagans considered of utmost importance the ability to communicate with the gods of the upper and lower worlds, and with the souls of deceased ancestors, because they

²⁴ Miroslav Tanasievich, *Egyptian Book of Lives*, (Opus: Belgrade, 1996) 39.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁶ Dr. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2001), 17. Author’s emphasis.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

expected assistance and blessing from them on a variety of occasions. Of course, before they would rain blessings on the people who worshiped them, the gods demanded the inhabitants of the earth to perform certain religious rituals:

“Only by erecting temples, financing priests and temple choirs, generous offerings of sacrifices, chanting elaborate prayers, and heeding shamans and prophets, the people could be confident to receive divine blessing and favor. Fertile herds, rich harvests, victories in battle, and anything associated with success, prosperity and peace depended on the mercy of the gods of Heaven or Sheol... **For gaining worldly benefits, rituals were paid to the dead and the gods of Sheol, or else were directed toward the powers in Heaven...** Veneration for ancestors also assumed organized forms of ritual. In one such ceremony, participants consumed large amounts of wine and also **poured wine on behalf of the dead**. During the ritual, everyone present, including the dead, were to imbibe. **A simpler rite involved placing bits of food and drink on family graves.**”²⁸

Therefore, according to the belief of the ancient Semitic peoples that inhabited the land before the Israelites settled the Middle East, the dead from the region ruled by the gods of the Underworld could assist their fellow men on Earth. According to the Scriptures, such alleged assistance provided by the dead in fact represented a diabolical deception. Through Moses, the Lord issued a strict prohibition against the invocation of dead souls through open spiritualism (or rather, Satanism). The Lord punished such activity with the death penalty:

*“When you come into the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, **or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD**, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; **but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you.**”*²⁹

*“A man or a woman who is a medium, or who has familiar spirits, shall surely be put to death; they shall stone them with stones. Their blood shall be upon them.”*³⁰

It is clear that God’s commandment declares the religious beliefs and actions practiced by the pagan peoples in the land of Israel to be accursed. This means that they are neither reasonable nor lawful. Such practices include the practice of invoking the dead (from Sheol) to assist the living.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19. Author’s emphasis.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 18:9-14. Author’s emphasis.

³⁰ Leviticus 20:27.

Unfortunately, after the death of Moses and Joshua up until the establishment of the kingdom of Israel, the Jewish people were inclined to adopt many pagan customs from the surrounding nations. After Saul was chosen as the first king over Israel, he had exterminated from his kingdom all those who practiced divination and sorcery. However, in the fortieth year of his reign, after God's Spirit departed from Saul because of his disobedience of the Lord's commandments, the initially cautious King Saul attended a séance performed by a witch to invoke the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel. Saul wanted to call upon the dead prophet, whom he knew personally for many years, in order to find out the details of the outcome of the impending battle on the next day. Here is the Biblical account:

“Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, ‘Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.’ And his servants said to him, ‘In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.’ So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, ‘Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.’ Then the woman said to him, ‘Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?’ And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, ‘As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.’ Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ And he said, ‘Bring up Samuel for me.’ When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!’ And the king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid. What did you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.’ So he said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.’ And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’ And Saul answered, ‘I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do.’ Then Samuel said: ‘So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.’ Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the

*words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night.”*³¹

Although the message received by the King from the spirit was true, because the next day Saul and his sons were killed in an armed conflict with the Philistines,³² on the basis of the Lord’s commandment, the spirit with whom Saul was talking was not the recently deceased prophet of God. Firstly, if the dead could truly re-emerge alive yet again, then the Lord would not have banned this phenomenon and denounced it as sorcery (spiritualism). Second, Saul himself did not see anyone apart from what the witch (medium) described from her “vision”. King Saul automatically assumed by her description of the spirit as “old and wearing a mantle” that this was Samuel. Additionally, when Saul asked what she saw, the witch answered, “I saw a spirit ascending from the earth.” Lujo Bakotić translates this verse as:

*“The woman told Saul, ‘I see **a god** ascending from the earth.’”*³³

Many other translations render this verse under some variation of “a god ascending from the earth.”³⁴ Recall the excerpts from Professors MacDannell and Lang, who showed that the belief of the ancients viewed the deceased in Sheol to have the capability of transforming into a kind of divinity.³⁵ We see that 1 Samuel 28 makes mention that “Samuel” ascended out of the earth (that is, from the underworld - the kingdom of the dead). This apparition came from a spiritualism of satanic inspiration, not from a faith that pleases God. It becomes obvious why this practice was strongly prohibited. The aforementioned "Samuel" from the medium’s vision was none other than one of the fallen angels (demons) who along with their head, the former cherubim Lucifer, aim to use religious deception to take the world captive.³⁶

Let us summarize the conclusion of this study:

Abiding in Sheol as recorded in the Old Testament was reserved for the spirits of all deceased persons. Those who entered Sheol included both those who believed in the true God and those who did not know Him. It was unknown to the Old Testament believers what fate awaited them in the realm of the dead, but they were sure that their Lord would not abandon them, and that He would have mercy on them at the Judgment Day.³⁷ King David describes such hope in one of his psalms:

³¹ 1 Samuel 28:3-20. Author’s emphasis.

³² See 1 Samuel 31:6.

³³ 1 Samuel 28:13. Author’s emphasis.

³⁴ Translator’s note: Hebrew word is “Elohim”. English translations that render this verse as “a god ascending” include Darby, American Standard Version, Douay Rheims 1899 [“gods”], English Standard Version, King James Version [“gods”], New American Standard Bible [“divine being”], and Wycliffe [“gods”]. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Samuel%2028:13&version=WYC> .

³⁵ See *Heaven: a History*, 20-21.

³⁶ See John 8:44; Revelation 12:9.

³⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

*“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”*³⁸

The Old Testament servants of God could have true confidence that the Lord would be with them in the afterlife. In the study that follows, we will present the New Testament texts that throw more light on the biblical teaching about life after death and the fate of humanity, past, present, and future.

Belief in the Afterlife in the New Testament

The previous section revealed teachings from the Old Testament on life after death. The human body returns to the dust from which it originated, and the spirit of life returns to God who gave it. The Old Testament also teaches about Sheol, a place where human souls separated from the body reside. Yet, there is little description beyond that of Sheol. The Old Testament Hebrew texts really give little information about life after death. The New Testament, on the other hand, gives detailed descriptions of what happens to man after his last breath and his surrender to God of “the spirit of life”.

Even so, the New Testament writings do not address many questions that arise out of human curiosity. Moreover, the Scriptures say volumes less about the afterlife than what is taught as core doctrine by several of today's churches and denominations. We will see in the next chapter that the Lord Jesus Christ talked in greater detail about the future judgment that would take place after the resurrection of the dead. The soul lives forever but will suffer the consequences of the judgment of God after the final resurrection. A person's abode in the grave is only temporary. First things first.

The only text quoting the Lord Christ regarding the condition of the souls of the deceased is written in Luke 16:19-31. This passage openly mentions the realm of the dead. Jesus actually explains the true meaning of what had been hidden in the Old Testament Scriptures, particularly the state of the souls of the deceased in Sheol. Although the author Luke wrote in Greek and used the Greek word “Hades”, which refers to the realm of the dead, it is certain that the Lord Jesus spoke with the Jews in Aramaic and used the Hebrew word Sheol.

*“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and **was carried by the angels to Abraham's side**. The rich man also died and was buried, **and in Hades, being in torment**, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, **for I am in anguish in this flame.**' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; **but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish**. And*

³⁸ Psalm 23:1, 4. Author's emphasis.

*besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come **into this place of torment.**' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.' ”³⁹*

This parable reveals several important details. Firstly, the event takes place after both poor Lazarus and the rich man die. Secondly, the soul of poor Lazarus was taken away by the angels to “Abraham's bosom,” while the rich man after his death reached the “place of torment” engulfed with flames. After their deaths, both of them retain their memories of the lives they lived on earth. (The rich man recognized Lazarus and remembered that five of his brothers still lived.) We note the possibility of communication (conversation) among the dead. The place of torment where the rich man found himself is called “Hell” (Greek “Hades”), while the place of “Abraham's bosom” is presented as a place of bliss (apparently it is compared to Heaven). They do not occupy their places in the afterlife because of their wealth or lack thereof. Rather, the real reason is found in verse 29 that mentions obedience (belief), or rather disobedience (unbelief) to what was written by Moses and the prophets – who wrote and testified about the coming and work of Christ the Savior.⁴⁰

So the Lord Jesus Christ tells us that Sheol, or Hades, had two separate places. The first place, called "Abraham's bosom", was a place of comfort for all pious and righteous Old Testament figures, while those who disobeyed God during the time of Adam, Enoch, Noah, his sons, and others were sent to the place of torment.

However, just because Jesus used the word “Sheol” or "Hades" to describe the historical event of death and developments in the afterlife by no means implies that He agreed with the pagan Greek concept of Hades. This term is only borrowed from the Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written), and used to translate the Hebrew word “Sheol” The Biblical concept of the afterlife in the Old Testament had nothing to do with that in ancient Greek mythology.⁴¹ The false pagan concept in the

³⁹ Luke 16:19-31. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁰ See Genesis 3:15, Deuteronomy 18:15, Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; 53, Psalm 16:10; 22:1, 6-8; 15-18, Luke 24:25-7, and John 5:39-40.

⁴¹ This is how the ancient Greeks imagined death and Hades: “**Deep under the earth is a place ruled by Hades, the brother of Zeus.** His kingdom is full of darkness and horror. The joyous rays of the sun never penetrate there. Beneath the surface of the earth descends the vast, bottomless abyss of the sad kingdom of Hades. Through Hades flows the current of a dark river, the River Styx, the waters by which the gods themselves made oaths. The waves of the river Acheron rolled and resounded with the groaning of souls full of sadness on its dark shores. Another underground source of water, the river Lethe, made souls forget everything they had remembered on earth. The kingdom of Hades included the dark Asphodel Meadows covered with white flowers that the disembodied souls of the dead picked... No one can return from this kingdom of sorrow. **Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Hades with a snake for a tail kept deceased souls from escaping Hades...** In the dark realm, souls in Hades were condemned to eternal existence without joy... **The god Thanatos** is seated on a throne there... From his dark lair, Thanatos flaps his

afterlife conflicted with God's true revelation through Jesus Christ.

In addition to using the word "Hell" in Luke 16, this term appears several times in the New Testament. Only the Lord Jesus Christ used this term.

The Usage of the Term "Hades" in the New Testament

The word "Hades" is used in the New Testament several times, including Matthew 16:18, Luke 10:15, 16:23, Acts. 2:27, 31, Revelations 1:18, 6:8, and 20:13-14. Here are the verses:

*"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of **Hades** shall not prevail against it."*⁴²

*"But I say to you that it will be more tolerable in that Day for Sodom than for that city. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to **Hades**."*⁴³

*"And being in torments in **Hades**, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."*⁴⁴

*"For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption."*⁴⁵

*"He, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in **Hades**, nor did His flesh see corruption."*⁴⁶

"And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, 'Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was

wings and runs around the battlefield in delight as he sees defeated heroes being slain one after another. His lips are covered in blood. He hungrily drinks the fresh blood and plucks souls from their dead bodies... The kingdom of Hades is full of unrelenting gloom and horror. **Terrible apparitions called Empusa with donkey legs wander in the darkness and trick people to come to a solitary place, where they devour their bodies while they still twitch and drink their blood. The wandering and monstrous Lamia sneaks out at night to the wards of happy mothers and steals children to drunk their blood. In the midst of all these hallucinations is the great goddess Hecate. It has three heads and three bodies...**" N. A. Kuhn, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Greece*, (Children's Books: Belgrade, 1990) 33-35. Author's emphasis.

⁴² Matthew 16:18. Author's emphasis.

⁴³ Luke 10:12-15. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁴ Luke 16:23. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁵ Acts 2:27. Author's emphasis.

⁴⁶ Acts 2:31. Author's emphasis.

*dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of **Hades** and of Death.”*⁴⁷

*“The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and **Hades** delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and **Hades** were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”*⁴⁸

Christ’s words in Matthew 16:18 explain that His church will be delivered from the eternal death that awaits unbelievers. First, He first tells us that He will build His church “on this rock” (which symbolizes Himself), and then points out that it will overcome the “gates of Hades”.

Gates are static, yet the church will triumph with dynamic power over her adversaries – an invisible legion of satanic forces.⁴⁹ The Lord equips His church with spiritual strength and vigor. Thus, the Lord enables His church to overcome the Devil and his angels. As the church preaches Christ’s message of salvation, millions of souls through history are delivered from eternal death to eternal life through Him.

Thus, Christ’s statement is not referring to a conflict between His church and an underground world filled with dead spirits. Scriptures such as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus tell us that once a person dies, God no longer gives him further opportunity to repent and attain eternal life. “Hades” symbolizes the objective of spiritual forces of Satan and his demons. They oppose the Lord and His saints on earth and strive to bring about the eternal death of billions of people.⁵⁰

The passage in Luke 10:12-15 refers to Jesus’s curse on the residents of cities in Galilee who did not believe His message, despite the Lord’s messianic signs having been revealed in those places. Jesus spoke of the pride of the inhabitants of Capernaum who did not want to accept Him and who believed the teaching of the Pharisees that their goodness would merit them a place in Heaven. Jesus warned them that without His intercession, they would be brought down “to Hades” instead of being exalted to Heaven.

To properly understand the use of the word “Hades”, let us examine the entire context of this verse. Before Jesus uses the word “Hades”, he mentions twice the Day of God’s Judgment which will follow the resurrection in verses 12 and 14. It is certain that God will not judge the cities on the Day in a literal sense. However, God will judge the sin of their deceased residents after their resurrection for the Day. Since it is impossible for

⁴⁷ Revelation 1:17-18. Author’s emphasis.

⁴⁸ Revelation 20:13-15. Author’s emphasis.

⁴⁹ See Ephesians 6:10-17.

⁵⁰ It is helpful to read the verse in Hebrews 2:14. This verse mentions that until Christ’s death and resurrection, Satan had “the power of death”. Since the “gates of Hades” in Matthew 16:18 obviously refer to the power of fallen angels, their association with the world of the dead is quite appropriate, particularly as the Lord Christ referred to their leader as a “murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). See 1 John 3:12.

a city of bricks to be demolished by “the underground spiritual world” of Hades, Jesus intended a different meaning. The elevated opinion of themselves will not help the inhabitants of Capernaum to face on Judgment Day Jesus Whom they rejected and ignored. Their city (work of their hands) in the future will surely lie in ruins, their souls will end up dead in Hades, and eventually they will face judgment and be sent to the Lake of Fire to suffer a penalty greater than what the sinful residents of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As for the speech of the Apostle Peter at Pentecost in Acts 2, in two places we find the word “Hades”. The Greek language uses “Hades” as a direct translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol” used by King David in Psalm 16:10. In both cases, commentator Emilian Carnic translates the term as “kingdom of the dead” and defines the word as the place in the underworld, “the heart of the earth”, where Jesus’ human spirit resided after death - until the resurrection.

Namely, at the request of the repentant thief to be remembered when Christ’s Kingdom would come, He answered:

*“And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, **today you will be with Me in Paradise.**’”*⁵¹

This text clearly proves that the spirit of Jesus, along with that of the criminal, would depart from their bodies to be in Heaven, otherwise known by the Jews as that part of Hades called “Abraham's bosom” - a place of comfort.

Regarding His stay in Hades, Jesus testified about it in mentioning “the Sign of Jonah”. Jesus told his contemporaries that in the near future, after his death, He would temporarily stay in the “heart of the earth”. This is identical with the place that the Old Testament calls the place where spirits of the deceased reside:

*“But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, **so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.**’”*⁵²

Regarding Jesus’s descent into the earth, the apostle Peter writes:

*“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive **by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient,** when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.”*⁵³

⁵¹ Luke 23:43. Author’s emphasis.

⁵² Matthew 12:39-40. Author’s emphasis.

⁵³ 1 Peter 3:18-20. Author’s emphasis.

But as we read in Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2, the spirit (soul) of Jesus is not abandoned to Sheol (Hades) because of His resurrection and reuniting of His soul to His dead body.

“Hades” is also mentioned in the last book of the New Testament - John's Revelation. Whenever John uses the term “Hades” in Revelation, he associates it with death, though he always uses the term “death” before the term “Hades”.

The first chapter tells us that Jesus owns the keys of death and Hades. In the sixth chapter, “the fourth horseman of the apocalypse” rides on a pale horse named “Death” with “Hades” accompanying them. Their appearance beckons a time of major earthly suffering. The twentieth chapter describes the resurrection from the dead of people who did not believe in Christ the Savior. A passage refers to the resurrection of dead bodies from “death” and “Hades” on the Day of Judgment.

Similar to the sixth chapter, the twentieth chapter also uses the names of “death” and “Hades” to represent major disasters to come into the world (perhaps embodied in the last global dictator - the Antichrist). They will result in the killing of many thousands of human beings and their being sent to the realm of the dead. Thus, they need to be resurrected from “death” and Hades” for the purpose of God’s judgment. Death in this text certainly means the event of the termination of human beings by God, and Hades refers to the realm of the dead where the spirits of deceased people are stored until the Day of Judgment.

Jesus in Revelation 1 states that He holds the keys to death and Hades. Jesus has the power to resurrect all people one day, such that their souls will be reunited to their formerly dead bodies. People who were believers in life will be resurrected to eternal life. People who did not believe in Jesus in their earthly life will be raised for eternal punishment.⁵⁴

Continuing with this vivid expression, the writer of Revelation at the end of the twentieth chapter shows that the last act of the Final Judgment consists of “casting death and Hades into the Lake of Fire”. After the Day and the creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth as a habitat for the resurrected righteous, never again will there be death, decay, and disintegration. Scripture tells us this about this future state of perfection:

*“And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; **there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.**”*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See John 5:28-9; 1 Corinthians 15:20-55; and Colossians 4:13-18.

⁵⁵ Revelation 21:3-4. Author’s emphasis.

In throwing death and Hades into the Lake of Fire, also called the second death, we see a vivid display of Christ's eternal power. Death and decay will disappear from the earth in the newly created universe.

Consistent with other passages in the Bible, the term "Hades" refers to the place to which man goes after his body ceases to function and awaits resurrection. In Old Testament times (until Christ's resurrection), both righteous and wicked souls went to Hades. But in the New Testament period, the situation changed. Only unrepentant souls go to Hades. In contrast, the souls of reborn Christians depart their bodies and go straight into the third heaven - the Lord's presence. We will examine this great topic later in the book.

Let us examine briefly what the Bible says regarding the metaphor of death as a dream.

Do Human Beings Sleep without Dreams after Death?

Different passages in the Old and New Testaments compare death to sleep. One might presume that a man after his last breath sinks into a state of deep sleep (dreamless sleep), after which follows his awakening in the resurrection from the dead. Although this conclusion is not correct, the fact is that God inspired the writers of the Bible to symbolize a person's death as a night's rest. Here are some verses that address this issue:

*"And at that time your people shall be delivered, Every one who is found written in the book. **And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt... But you, go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days.**"*⁵⁶

*"When Jesus came into the ruler's house, and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd wailing, He said to them, 'Make room, for the girl is not dead, **but sleeping.**' And they ridiculed Him."*⁵⁷

*"These things He said, and after that He said to them, 'Our friend **Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.**' Then His disciples said, 'Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.' However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, '**Lazarus is dead.**'"*⁵⁸

*"And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, **he fell asleep.**"*⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Daniel 12:1-2, 13. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁷ Matthew 9:23-4. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁸ John 11:11-14. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁹ Acts 7:59-60. Author's emphasis.

*“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*⁶⁰

*“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus, For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede **those who are asleep.**”*⁶¹

There are various reasons why the state of death is compared with sleep. First, just as sleep is a temporary state of inactivity (limited to a few hours a day), after which a person wakes up rested and refreshed, so after a temporary stay in the grave to which a deceased person’s soul arrives, that person gains a new, eternal body in resurrection. Also, the fact that the Son of God can so easily raise anyone from the dead resembles how we as merely mortal people can wake up after having been physically exhausted by fatigue and having slept. Third, the reality is that the height of human activity occurs when he or she is awake, while during sleep, a person takes time off from the world around him. Likewise, a human being created to live for eternity in his body will experience fullness of life with God or without Him after the resurrection, not when his body lies dormant.

The Actual State of the Deceased before the Lord

Other passages in the New Testament express the hopes of the apostles to be with the Lord after death. They recall the words of Jesus to Martha, sister of Lazarus:

*“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. **He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?**’”*⁶²

Upon reflecting on the greatness of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and its significance for faith, the apostle Paul shouts for joy:

*“**For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”*⁶³

So, if a person is saved for eternity through faith in Jesus the Savior, it means that physical death cannot separate that person from Him. Jesus said, that he who believes in Him will be alive (in His presence) after physical death. That is why the apostle Paul could say that he was ready, together with other believers, to “*be absent from the body*

⁶⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:20. Author’s emphasis.

⁶¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:14-5. Author’s emphasis.

⁶² John 11:25-6. Author’s emphasis.

⁶³ Romans 8:38-9. Author’s emphasis.

and present with the Lord.”⁶⁴ In another passage, Paul even more clearly affirmed his belief that a Christian after his death went to be with the Lord:

*“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, **having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.** Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.”*⁶⁵

The same apostle describes a vision to the believers in Corinth. In a supernatural way, Paul himself was transferred to the third heaven, or paradise - where Christ Himself is seated at the right hand of God:

*“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether **in the body** I do not know, or whether **out of the body** I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether **in the body** or **out of the body** I do not know, God knows - how he was **caught up into Paradise** and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”*⁶⁶

The book of Revelation confirms that the faithful after death will meet the Lord in John’s vision. John describes the following future developments:

*“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw **under the altar the souls of those who had been slain** for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, **who would be killed as they were, was completed.**”*⁶⁷

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the church in Heaven consists of the souls of believers who have died:

*“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, **to the spirits of just men made perfect**, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant...”*⁶⁸

Stephen, the first deacon and martyr of the Christian church, asserts his confidence that the Lord would take his soul to Himself at the time of his death:

⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:8.

⁶⁵ Philippians 1:21-4. Author’s emphasis.

⁶⁶ 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. Author’s emphasis.

⁶⁷ Revelation 6:9-11. Author’s emphasis.

⁶⁸ Hebrews 12:22-4. Author’s emphasis.

*“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”*⁶⁹

Stephen echoes the words of Jesus Christ:

*“And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.’ Having said this, He breathed His last.”*⁷⁰

On the basis of what we have mentioned about the afterlife, it is clear that the human soul, or spirit, separates from the body after death. The soul of a believer goes to God in Heaven, while the soul of an unbeliever goes to Hades, a place of torment.⁷¹

In contrast to the false teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy, the Bible teaches that the sole requirement for a person to go to Heaven is to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, thus securing justification before God by faith in the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. (We demonstrated this truth in the second chapter of this book.) Such faith occurs only in a person’s life on earth.

The Bible never teaches that the eternal destiny of a person can change after death. Eternal life, life with God, is attained through faith in Jesus during a person’s earthly life, which Scripture states very clearly. Anyone who has lived a life pleasing to God belongs to the Lord, whether he is alive or has died:

*“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”*⁷²

⁶⁹ Acts 7:59-60. Author’s emphasis.

⁷⁰ Luke 23:46. Author’s emphasis.

⁷¹ In contrast to Hades, the New Testament uses a different term to describe the ultimate destiny of unrepentant sinners. “Hell” is translated as a place of humiliation and eternal torment by unquenchable fire. The Hebrew word is “Gehenna”. It originates from two Hebrew words: “Ge” and “Hinnom”, which mean “Valley of the Sons of Hinnom”, i.e., “the Valley of Topheth”. A physical place is located near the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem, where in ancient times they offered human sacrifices to pagan deities (2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6, Jeremiah 7:28-33). Before and during the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, this valley was used as a landfill where they dumped garbage and dead animals. In order to prevent the spread of disease, residents of this landfill kept constantly burning the refuse (that is, they kept a constant fire burning). Describing the situation of resurrected unrepentant sinners who will constantly be subjected to fire in Hell, and at the same time having insect larvae (worms) crawling on the carcasses of animals discarded in the burning landfill, Jesus said that “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43-48) Matthew 10:28 relates how Jesus tells his listeners not to fear those who can kill the body because they cannot kill the soul. Rather, He warns them to be exceedingly afraid of him who “can kill both body and soul in Hell”. Here the term “Hell”, as in other places, refers to “Gehenna”, the Lake of Fire, in which unbelieving people after their resurrection from the dead will be cast. The Lake of Fire (Hell) in the New Testament is described as a place of continuous, eternal torture in fire that will never go out. It was also created to punish Satan and his demons. More information on this topic is found in: Mt. 5:29-30, 10:28, 13:41-42, 23:15, 25:41, 46; 2 Sol. 1:9; 2 Petr. 2:9, 17, Jude 7, 13; Rev. 2:11, 19:20, 20:6, 10, 14-15; 21:8.

⁷² Romans 14:7-8. Author’s emphasis.

On the other hand, numerous verses accurately point out the fact that a person who disobeys God in his earthly life has no hope for anything better after his death.

*“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”*⁷³

Further study will reveal that the Orthodox Church, unfortunately, teaches a theology of the afterlife that contradicts the Bible. Almost everything about this distorted theology is based upon subsequent ecclesiastical authority (or sacred tradition) and deviates from the Biblical truth revealed by God. We will examine this problematic teaching of Eastern Orthodoxy in the next section.

Orthodox Teachings about Life after Death

The following study will show that the belief of the Orthodox Church about the afterlife contains many errors. Such errors stem from Orthodoxy’s reliance on a number of teachings coming from non-biblical sources. In fact, at times they clearly contradict the teachings of God’s Word. One major source of these Orthodox teachings is pagan customs that were adapted into the church centuries after Christ. A second group of major sources for these strange Orthodox teachings is based on dreams and visions of the afterlife that came from people who lived centuries after the apostles (even in the twentieth century). Yet a third major source of Orthodox doctrine on the afterlife stems from its doctrine of salvation through good works. This subject was addressed and refuted in Chapters Two and Three of this book.

Naturally, in order to rationalize their unbiblical doctrines, Eastern Orthodox teachers once again resort to misquoting biblical texts outside of their actual contexts. They feel compelled to misquote the Bible in an attempt to rationalize their sayings based on sacred traditions that come from men. As stated earlier, it will be quite easy to expose the fallaciousness of these strange Orthodox teachings on life after death. We will present the truth later in this chapter.

Prayers for the Dead

The beginning of our study on Eastern Orthodoxy’s teachings on the afterlife commences with the belief in the necessity of prayers for the dead. We will cite once again a statement from Ivan Nikolin, the Russian Orthodox apologist. Even Nikolin admits the reality that the concept of “prayers for the dead” has no basis in Holy Scripture. Indeed, it arose at a later date through sacred tradition (e.g. the teaching of the church fathers):

⁷³ John 3:36. Author’s emphasis.

“If Sacred Tradition were unable to complement Holy Scripture, then many religious issues (veneration for the saints, icons, **prayers for the dead**) would remain without a favorable verdict.”⁷⁴

It is critical to remember this assertion of the Russian Orthodox theologian before embarking on further study. Clearly this is why Orthodox colleagues are compelled to cite a number of Scriptural texts in order to defend the practice of prayers for the dead. What will naturally become clear very quickly is that these verses in their proper context show something completely different. Indeed, the meaning of these Scriptures in no way can be used for proving the dogma of prayers for the dead.

Serbian Orthodox apologist Lazar Milin attempts to justify the practice of prayer for the dead:

“As God’s final judgment will be rendered only after the resurrection, a verdict binding for all eternity, then no particular judgment is complete or definitive from the time after a person’s death until the final judgment. If the sins of the soul concerned are not mortal, then judgment can be alleviated by prayers for the dead.

The basis for such prayer comes from the Scriptures. The Scriptures teach us that we should pray for one another (James 5:16), and to pray for all men (1 Timothy 2:1). The Scriptures make no spatial or temporal limitations to how people should pray, for to God “*all live to Him*” (Luke 20:38) and thus we all belong to the Lord, whether we live or have died (Romans 14:8). Therefore, Holy Scripture teaches us to pray for one another, not only for our acquaintances still alive on this earth, but also for our brothers who have departed from the earthly to the spiritual world.

The Savior said that “...whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the *age to come*.” (Matthew 12:32) The implication is that there exist sins that could be forgiven in the age to come. Such sins include anything that does not involve blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-2)... But since the dead can no longer do anything to improve his condition after death, yet the principle states that his condition could still be improved because some of his sins could still be forgiven in “*the age to come*”, it follows that forgiveness can be obtained from God only through the prayers of the Church and those still alive who are praying for these dead souls.

The Savior has given us a very reassuring promise: “*And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.*” (John 14:13-14) Since the Savior is the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5), He has reconciled humanity with God by offering Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world and having

⁷⁴ Ivan Petrovich Nikolin, *A Course on Basic Theology or Apologetics*, (Sergiev Posad, 1904) 160. Author’s emphasis.

shed His blood (Matthew 26: 26-28, Luke. 22:19-20). **Thus, our prayers extend not just for the living, but also on behalf of the dead. Such prayers are very pleasing to God and represent mercy to the deceased ones** who are connected to the bloody sacrifice brought forth by the liturgy.

The Church has inherited this teaching, clearly based on Holy Scripture, from the Sacred Tradition of the Holy Apostles. **Yet, since the earliest times of the Church, prayer was conducted not only on behalf of the living, but also for the dead...** As we have seen, the Church's practice of prayers for the dead and all its liturgical rites, including funerals, divine liturgy, and memorials, **are strictly based on the Scriptures.**" ⁷⁵

Throughout this lengthy excerpt from Milin's book on the Orthodox Church and "sects", he attempts to prove the fallaciousness of beliefs of evangelical Christians. He cites numerous verses from the Book of Books. According to Milin, there is no doubt that Scripture affirms Orthodox belief and practice. But if we assume that Ivan Nikolin, also an Orthodox theologian, has as much theological education as Milin, then a question arises. How could these two Orthodox theologians arrive at two completely opposite conclusions? Nikolin appears sincere in his statement that without sacred tradition, Holy Scripture does not affirm the Orthodox doctrine of prayers for the dead. (Lest Scriptures are misquoted out of context, as some Orthodox teachers are willing to do.) It is easy to prove that Nikolin's statement is correct. Let us examine in context the Biblical verses cited by L. Milin. (It is noteworthy that Milin chooses merely to cite verse references and paraphrase content as he sees fit.) Let the discerning reader check his or her own Bible to verify whether Milin has accurately represented the Bible or not.

Indeed, James 5:16 exhorts believers to pray for one another: 1 Timothy 2:1 commands believers to pray for all men. However, the apostles do not tell believers to pray for the souls of the dead. The context of James 5:16 deals with the recuperation of living people fighting disease. The context of 1 Timothy 2:1 informs us to pray for the conversion of people who do not yet believe in the Savior, their adoption of salvation through faith in Christ, and for people already converted to devote themselves to a quiet life (without persecution).

Later on, Milin gives us a liberal interpretation that Scripture implies that one should pray for all people – without any boundaries of time – that he claims to encompass both those who are alive and those who are dead. He bases his interpretation on Luke 20:38 that "all live to Him". This verse was analyzed in the previous chapter on "Veneration of the Saints", which revealed that the full context of verses 27-40 describes Christ's answer to the Sadducees regarding the resurrection from the dead. Milin has no basis whatsoever to infer that this text establishes the doctrine of prayers for the dead.

Milin mentions Romans 14:8 as his next proof text. Here is the context of the verse (Romans 14:7-9):

⁷⁵ Milin, *Church and Sects*, 251-2. Author's emphasis.

“For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

In this section as well as the one that precedes it (verses 1-6), the apostle Paul asserts the fact that the life of every Christian believer should be entirely subordinated to the will of the Lord and serving his or her neighbor. It also talks about the security of salvation (by faith in the Savior), because *“whether we live, whether we die, we belong to the Lord.”* Christ Himself said:

*“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”*⁷⁶

It is obvious that these verses have nothing to do with prayers for the dead. In fact, they suggest an implication opposite to that which Milin infers into these texts. Namely, a true Christian belongs to the Lord both during his lifetime and after death. (The opposite is also the case for unbelievers as shown in Christ’s word of eternal condemnation recorded in John 3:18, 36.) It is not at all clear why the Orthodox associate these verses with their belief.

Milin’s next selection of verses does not support the practice of prayer for the dead. These verses consist of Christ speaking of *“blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”* as an unpardonable sin, which *“will not be forgiven in this age or the age to come.”* Eastern Orthodox logic infers from these verses that sins except *“blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”* can be forgiven in the next world, even though the Lord never indicated the slightest possibility for such speculation. Thus, as with any other verse that cannot be interpreted outside of its context, so we must examine the context of this verse.

What preceded Jesus’ statement that *“all sins could be forgiven of men, except for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”* was an accusation against Jesus. The Pharisees accused Him of being the servant of the devil, Beelzebub. According to the Pharisees’ perverse logic, only the ruler of demons could cast out demons (verses 23-24). This is the Lord’s answer:

*“But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you.”*⁷⁷

So, Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit of God, not by the devil's power. Christ’s response to the accusation by the traditionalist Pharisees of equating the Holy Spirit of God with the unclean spirit of Beelzebub, is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - a sin that can never be forgiven. In fact, the apostle John in the third chapter of his Gospel says that Nicodemus acknowledged that the Pharisees had the insight that Jesus performed miracles with divine power:

⁷⁶ John 11:25.

⁷⁷ Matthew 12:28.

*“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘**Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.**’”*⁷⁸

However, even though they knew that He was a teacher who came from God, the Pharisees as religious people were disobedient to the Lord's will and were driven by concerns about losing prestige and respect from the people who gave them all kinds of honor (see Mark 15:9-10, John 11:47-48, 12:19). Jesus was accused of various crimes. One of the most serious charges was their accusation declaring Jesus to be Satan's servant. It appears that the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (the sin that shall never be forgiven) was actually a conscious and deliberate rejection of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior.

By no means does it mean that all other sins can be forgiven after the death of the individual. On the contrary! When Christ states that "*all sins can be forgiven of men*", he means that God's forgiveness is conditioned upon the repentance of those who have blasphemed God and His Son Jesus Christ out of their unbelief. According to the Lord's words, the Holy Spirit conviction of the world proves that the lack of faith in the Savior is indeed a great sin:

*“However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.”*⁷⁹

*“And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: **of sin, because they do not believe in Me...**”*⁸⁰

The only way for a person to be saved is for his sins to be forgiven. This not only entails that such a person did not blaspheme the Holy Spirit. That person must also have listened to the Holy Spirit in faith and dedicated his life to Christ the Savior. The Word of God testifies that any man who dies spiritually unregenerate certainly will be judged. No mercy or forgiveness will be available for him.

*“He who believes in Him is not condemned; **but he who does not believe is condemned already**, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but **the wrath of God abides on him.**”*⁸¹

Thus, the phrase that "*blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*" cannot be forgiven, neither in this age, nor in the other world, does not mean that other sins can be forgiven. Rather, this verse points to the magnitude of sin and disobedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit who bears witness of the Savior (cf. John 15:26).

⁷⁸ John 3:1-2. Author's emphasis.

⁷⁹ John 16:13.

⁸⁰ John 16:8-9. Author's emphasis.

⁸¹ John 3:18, 36. Author's emphasis.

Knowledge of the foundational truths of Scripture render it almost unnecessary to analyze the remaining verses of the Gospel that the Eastern Orthodox Church uses to rationalize its practice of prayers for the dead. John 14:13-14 mentions Jesus' promise to the disciples that He will answer each prayer offered to Him according to His will. This passage offers no support whatsoever for prayers for the dead. Indeed, such prayers would be superfluous because Christians who would have died would have already experienced God's grace of forgiveness of sin and experience of the new spiritual birth. The verses from Romans 14:7-8 do not conform to Milin's misinterpretation. On the other hand, the unbelieving people have been convicted because of his infidelity, the eternal threat of condemnation to a person who does not repent until the end of his earthly existence.

Thus, these Biblical references cited by Milin fail to support the Orthodox teaching on prayer for the dead. Indeed, Ivan Nikolin's assertion that the Bible does not support prayer for the dead is correct. Only Sacred Tradition can be cited to support the Orthodox practice of prayer for the dead. In fact, the Bible would suggest that prayer for the dead is a harmful practice, not a praiseworthy one.

Apocryphal Literature and Prayer for the Dead

While the Orthodox cannot find support for prayer for the dead in neither the Old nor the New Testament, they are able to make an appeal to apocryphal literature. It is a fact that many theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church defend their dogma of the Mother of God, which cannot be found in the Bible, based on the apocryphal book "The Protoevangelium of James", which was examine in Chapter 5 of our book. Speaking of the toll-houses (a topic to be discussed later in this chapter) and offerings for the souls of the dead for the forgiveness of their sins, Serbian Orthodox apologist Lazar Milin cites "evidence" from two apocryphal books allegedly from Old Testament times. These two books are Sirach and 2 Maccabees. This is what Milin writes:

"Finally, it is interesting to note that Old Testament Jews practiced prayers for the dead. When they found amulets devoted to pagan idols inside the robes of Jewish soldiers killed during the uprising of Judas Maccabees, then all the Jews turned to God in prayer to ask forgiveness for this sin on behalf of the dead soldiers. Judas himself sent to Jerusalem a burnt offering on behalf of the sins of the dead soldiers and as prayer for the dead to be cleansed from sin (2 Mac. 12:39-46). So, prayer for the dead did not originate solely from polytheistic traditions that the Church allegedly copied, **but it is a custom practiced throughout humanity. Prayer for the dead was introduced into the Church on the basis of Scripture and Holy Tradition.**"⁸²

What the Orthodox theologian omitted to tell us is that these "Old Testament Jews" were living in a time after the writing of the Old Testament (in the second century B.C.) when Hellenistic (Greek) culture and beliefs held great influence over the Jewish religion. These Jews certainly could not have found the practice of prayers for the dead in the Old

⁸² Milin, 253. Author's emphasis.

Testament books written by God's prophets, for the Old Testament knew no such things. In contrast, Greek religion rationalized the continued existence of the soul after death by prescribing certain rituals for the living to ensure their welfare in the afterlife.

The reason such books are called apocryphal and are excluded from the Old and New Testaments is because the apocryphal books diverged from divine revelation. As mentioned in the first chapter, the Apocryphal books, such as the very 2 Maccabees cited by Milin, condone suicide and call it an "honorable practice." (2 Maccabees 14:41-6) Such teaching utterly opposes the Word of God in the Old Testament canon. The Old Testament condemns suicide and says that our days belong to the Lord and not in our hands (Psalm 31:15-16).

After all, Milin himself admits that the practice of prayers for the dead are "customs practiced throughout humanity" (which is mostly pagan) and were introduced to the Church on the basis of Scripture. The Orthodox Church considers the Apocrypha to be deuterocanonical and not apocryphal. In other words, Eastern Orthodoxy considers the authority of the Apocrypha as binding on believers as much as the Holy Scriptures. Such a position enables Orthodoxy to rationalize its practices introduced through Sacred Tradition (that is, religious ideas later introduced by teachers who were not totally converted to Christianity, the Church Fathers).

And learning how sacred tradition, which dates from later centuries, is different from what were at the beginning of the Christian era and the apostles preached Christ, the best way to show the belief of the existence of heavenly demonic customs.

Teaching about Aerial Toll Houses

It is useful to note that this teaching appeared in the dogma of the Orthodox Church after the Seventh Ecumenical Council. Vladeta Jerotić in his work *The Old and the New in Christianity* asserts that the doctrine of toll houses actually is still considered to be unofficial teaching - probably because it has not been confirmed by any ecumenical council.⁸³ Eastern Orthodox literature offers as proof for these "heavenly custom houses" the content of the dreams of the Venerable Gregory, a disciple of St. Basil the New, who alleged to have these dreams in the tenth century AD. Before examining the content of the dreams offered as proof by the Orthodox for tollhouses, let us answer a

⁸³ Speaking about some of the ancient Serbian beliefs about life after death, Jerotić says this: "John, or St. John, according to folk tradition of the Serbian people, plays the role of receiving souls [from deceased persons], quite similar to the role of the ancient Greek supreme deity of the lower world. **Is it possible that such tradition contributed to the adoption of the (unofficial) doctrine of toll houses in the Serbian Orthodox Church?**" *The Old and the New in Christianity*, (Belgrade 2000) 18. Author's emphasis.

[Translator's note: for a nearly apologetic tone on tollhouses, see http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/dogmatics_pomazansky.htm - *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky. The subject appears to cause him some discomfort even as he attempts to rationalize it.]

simpler question: what exactly are toll-houses? Here is one explanation by an Orthodox teacher:

“Toll houses are a type of **customs office**, which the souls of dead people passed by on their way to the throne of the Heavenly Judge. Within the toll houses dwell evil spirits which demand tolls or fines as a result of the sins committed by each soul. The tolls or fines are paid in good works to offset the extent of the sin. The names “toll house” and “tax collector” are borrowed from Jewish history. According to the Jews, toll houses (e.g., tax collectors) are the designation given to people appointed by the Romans to collect taxes. In this work, the tax collector uses all possible means to collect more taxes. The tax collector stands at the customs office of the special or excise duty station and charges excise duties on goods sold. Such excise stations were called toll houses.

Christian writers used the name ‘toll house’ to denote aerial toll houses located between heaven and earth. **Inside these aerial toll houses, evil spirits meet the souls of the deceased at the entrance of the Throne of their Lord**, investigate their sins, prosecute their souls for all possible sins, and thus attempt to bring them down to Hell.”⁸⁴

The Bible does not support this explanation of the Orthodox teaching on toll houses in the afterlife. Contrary to what Scripture teaches, this Orthodox belief is based on utterly unbiblical presumptions, including the doctrine of salvation through good works and demons that have the power to prosecute the soul of a Christian upon physical death. In an attempt to support such innovative doctrine, the Orthodox often use verses from Ephesians 2:1-2 and 6:12. Here is an excerpt from the tract by the Mileshev Monastery.

“**Holy Scriptures... call it the air: a cloud of evil spirits.** Because our war is not against flesh and blood, but we fight against powers, principalities, and the rulers of this dark world, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places, and their prince, **who is the prince of the air.**”⁸⁵

This Orthodox tract refers to the following verses in Scripture:

*“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience..”*⁸⁶

*“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Tract by Justin Popovic, *The Way of the Soul after Death – Toll Houses from the Life of the Venerable Basil the New*, (Monastic Cells:1995). Author’s emphasis.

⁸⁵ *After Death*, (Mileshev Monastery, 1991) 48. Author’s emphasis.

⁸⁶ Ephesians 2:1-2.

⁸⁷ Ephesians 6:12.

The apostle Paul in these two verses says nothing about the afterlife and the soul passing through Orthodox toll houses. An examination of the verses' broader contexts demonstrates this point even more clearly. Rather, Paul describes the scope of satanic activity in the area where living human beings dwell, that is, the demons operating in the sky over the Earth where human beings walk. The implication for Christians is that Satan along with his demonic army is very close. Thus, Christians need to use spiritual weapons on the earth to preach the Gospel to people who are ignorant and thus still under Satan's domain (see 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 and Acts. 26:17-18).

The wider context of this passage in Ephesians illustrates this conclusion:

*“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. **Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. **Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.** Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...”⁸⁸*

The Orthodox tear out one verse out of its context and distort Paul's idea in Ephesians 6. Such misinterpretation only demonstrates the weakness of the faulty reasoning of Orthodox theologians. These Orthodox teachers in vain try to force the Bible to support their ideas from sacred tradition, which, unfortunately, they trust much more than God's own words.

Now let us study the content and details of the dreams of the Venerable Gregory. This study will reveal how far the Orthodox teachings on the afterlife compare with the truth of the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

The Venerable Gregory

Basil the New was a famous Orthodox saint from the tenth century. He had two disciples, Gregory and Theodora. After her death, Gregory wanted to know what happened to Theodora's soul, and asked St. Basil to pray to God in order to satisfy his curiosity.

This account originating from the blessed Theodora of the fate of the soul after death is characteristic of the Middle Ages, an era where ignorance and distortion of the Word of God by Satan's lies and deception were rampant:

⁸⁸ Ephesians 6:10-17. Author's emphasis.

“Theodora was a nun and servant of St. Basil the New (March 26). After her death, she appeared to St. Gregory, a disciple of Basil, and described for him all twenty toll-houses through which her soul had passed until, through the prayers of St. Basil, she had entered into eternal rest. Theodora presented herself to the Lord on December 30, 940.”⁸⁹

“And Gregory saw a vision in his dream and recorded what Theodora had told him:

‘My child Gregory, you have asked me about a terrible thing, which it is frightening even to recollect.

When the hour of my death came, I saw faces such as I had never seen before, and heard words such as I had never heard. What shall I say? Cruel and hard to endure evils, of which I formerly had no idea, encountered me then because of my evil deeds. However, through the prayers and the assistance of our common spiritual father Basil I was saved from these hardships. But how shall I tell you about that physical pain, that stress and close feeling which the dying experience? **Like a man who, entirely naked, falls into a great fire, burns, melts, and turns into ashes; so the dying are destroyed by their deathly illness in the bitter hour when the soul parts from the body.**⁹⁰

When I drew near the end of my life and the time of my departure hence had come, I saw a great multitude of Ethiopians who had surrounded my couch.⁹¹ Their faces were dark like soot and pitch, their eyes were like glowing coals, and their entire appearance was as frightening and evil as the fiery hell itself. **They began to grow indignant and to make noise like dogs; others howled like wolves...** When I was at the end of my strength I saw two radiant angels of God, who were like youths of inexpressible beauty... As I saw them I was filled with joy and looked at them with pleasure.

⁸⁹ Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologues of Ohrid*, December 30. (See <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/my.html?month=December&day=30>).

⁹⁰ Contrary to this statement by the Blessed Theodora about “angels” and “the soul of dead saints”, another view comes from a mystic, the Indian Sundar Singh. He argued that death is painless: “As stated earlier, the Indian Christian Sundar Singh had other spiritual visions and conversations with angels and the souls of the saints from the afterlife. In these visions and conversations, they spoke of death, the afterlife, and the destiny of the righteous and the sinful souls. Here is what he learned about death: ‘Death is like a dream. **There is no trouble crossing over to that side** (that is, in the afterlife), **except in the case of physical illness and mental condition.** As a man gets tired, he is overwhelmed with deep sleep, and dreams of death come to man. For some, death came so suddenly that only after great difficulty did they understand that they left the material world and entered the spirit world.’” See Z. Marinkovic, *The Greatest Teacher*, 331. Author’s emphasis.

⁹¹ [Translator’s note: “Ethiopians” is used in this translation, though the tract to which the author refers uses “Arabs”.] Instead of the Arabs, with whom the Blessed Theodora compared Satan’s demons, a repentant robber who died during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Maurice described the creatures that approached his soul after death as “Ethiopians”, who fled screaming after the intervention of angels to carry the thief’s soul to Heaven. See Bishop Nikolai, *Prologues from Ohrid*, October 18. (See <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.cgi> .)

The **black Ethiopians** shuddered and retreated some distance... When the angel ceased speaking, the Ethiopians tottered, began to cry out, and mutter, and point to all my evil deeds, committed from my youth on. They exclaimed: 'We have no part in her, you say! Whose sins then are these? Did she not do such and such?' With such exclamations they kept their position and were waiting for death. When **death** came, it was roaring like a lion and was very frightening in appearance. It looked like a human being but had no body; instead **it consisted of human bones**. Death brought various instruments of torture, such as swords, arrows, javelins, sickles, saws, and others unknown to me. When I saw these, my humble soul trembled with fear. The holy angels said to death: 'Do not tarry, free this soul from its bodily ties, and do it fast and quietly, for she has but a small burden of sins.' Death stepped up to me, took a small axe and separated my legs, then my arms; then with its other instruments it weakened all the rest of my limbs, separating them joint by joint. I lost the use of my arms and legs, my whole body grew numb, and I no longer was able to move. Finally **death cut off my head**, and I no longer could move it, for it felt as if it belonged to someone else. Lastly, death dissolved in a cup some kind of mixture, **and putting the cup to my lips**, made me drink. The potion was so bitter that my soul was unable to endure it. It shuddered and went out of my body.'"⁹²

To summarize Theodora's account of the afterlife in this "Christian" nun's experience, her soul traveled 40 days to Heaven by passing through the satanic toll houses. At the toll houses her soul was tested for her past sins. At the first toll house, she was tormented by the sins of speaking (empty conversation, laughter, blasphemy, obscene shouts, singing songs, etc.). At the second toll house, she was tormented with other verbal sins: lies, perjury, and failure to comply with covenants and oaths, and the like. At the third toll house she was tormented by ridicule, condemnation, and vilification by relatives, as well as mockery and humiliation.

The remaining toll houses include:

“The fourth is the toll-house of gluttony;
The fifth is the toll-house of laziness;
The sixth toll-house is the toll-house of theft;
The seventh is the toll-house of covetousness;
The eight is the toll-house of usury;
The ninth is the toll-house of injustice;
The tenth is the toll-house of envy;
The eleventh is the toll-house of pride;
The twelve is the toll-house of anger;
The thirteenth is the toll-house of remembering evil;
The fourteenth is the toll-house of murder;
The fifteenth is the toll-house of magic;

⁹² Translator's note: see <http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/theodora.aspx> . Author's note: Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *What Happens to the Soul*, (Lantern) 30-2. Author's emphasis.

The sixteenth is the toll-house of lust;⁹³
The seventeenth is the toll-house of adultery;
The eighteenth is the toll-house of sodomy;
The nineteenth is the toll-house of heresy (false teaching on faith, apostasy
from the Orthodox faith, and blasphemy);
The twentieth toll-house is the toll-house of lack of mercy.”⁹⁴

According to the vision of the Blessed Theodora, none of a person’s good deeds will save him or her at the twentieth toll house if that person believed anything contrary to the rules established by the Orthodox Church and its canons. (Indeed, many of today’s Orthodox Serbs believe in things like reincarnation and astrology, which are contrary to the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy.) Such a person would unquestionably be thrown into hell as the demons would expose the burden of heresy on the deceased soul.

Scripture makes it very clear that the Orthodox doctrine of toll houses completely negates the value of Christ’s redeeming death and His resurrection from the dead. As discussed in chapters two and three, the Word of God strongly emphasizes that God saves people not on the basis of their good works, but rather only through faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. Such faith gives believers spiritual rebirth of God the Holy Spirit and makes them children of God:

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”*⁹⁵

However, despite this clear Biblical teaching, sacred tradition asserts that not only must a person be saved by his own good works, but the living saints can redeem the souls of the deceased with their prayers (in the form of gold coins) paid to the demonic customs offices as a result of past sins when the deceased had lived on the earth. Let the Blessed Theodora explain:

“The light-bearing angels immediately took it in their arms. When I looked back I saw my body lying breathless and immovable. I looked at my body like someone who has taken off his clothes and thrown them down; this was a strange feeling. Meanwhile, although the holy angels were holding me, the demons, in their Ethiopian guise, surrounded us and cried: **'This soul has a multitude of sins—let her answer for them!'** They kept pointing to my sins, but the holy angels sought out **my good deeds**; and indeed, with God’s **help they found all that, by God’s grace, I ever did of good...**

⁹³ The authors of the book *After Death* from which this passage is cited apparently missed the fifteenth toll house. [Translator’s note: this list corrects their mistake.]

⁹⁴ *After Death*, 47-8. Author’s emphasis. [Translator’s note: see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aerial_toll_house and list on <http://www.dorogadomj.com/d71zhi.html> taken from book Monk Mitrofan, *How Do Our Deceased Live and How Will We Live after Death*, (St. Petersburg, Russia: 1897) 21. Translated in 1991 as *The Temple of the Saints Living on Russian Soil* (Burlingame, CA: 1991) and translated by Stefan V. Pavlenko in 2005.]

⁹⁵ Ephesians 2:8-9. Author’s emphasis.

The Ethiopians, however, saw this and gnashed their teeth at me. They wanted to tear me instantly from the angels' arms and to carry me down to the bottom of hell. At this time holy Basil himself appeared unexpectedly and said to the holy angels. 'Holy angels! This soul did great service to ease my old age, and therefore I prayed for her to God, and God has given her to me.' Having said this, he took something out that **appeared like a little bag of gold** and gave it to the angels with the words: 'Here is the treasure of prayers before the Lord for this soul! As you pass through the torments of the air and the evil spirits begin to torment her, **pay her debts** with this. I am rich by the grace of God, I gathered my large stash **of sweat and toil**. I give you this bag to help your soul.' After he said that, he left. ⁹⁶

We see that it is possible to pay a “bribe” at the toll houses in the spiritual world just as it occurs on earth. Demons take gold from the hands of angels on behalf of the soul. On the soul’s own merits, the soul would never arrive in Heaven. Nowhere does this fable mention anything about the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses the sins of those who repent. Yet, this passage mentions the redemption of sins based on money.

Here is what the Word of God reveals as the only source of true redemption and forgiveness of sins before God:

*“Knowing that you **were not redeemed** with corruptible things, **like silver or gold**, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, **but with the precious blood of Christ**, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.”* ⁹⁷

*“...**And the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin**... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* ⁹⁸

However, the gold of St. Basil gives a different method, as it symbolizes the saint’s “good deeds”. After all, St. Basil asserts that he has amassed a great “stash of sweat and toil”. Not only does he possess enough good works to save himself, but he has a surplus that he can share with others.

St. Basil’s statements contradict the teaching of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:9 that salvation is “*not of works lest any man should boast.*” Yet in spite of the clear teaching of Scripture, St. Basil praises his own works and merits!

The Bible never ever teaches that God’s servants can boast of any merit or goodness before Him. Instead of boasting, God’s people confessed their own imperfections, though they were worshipers of God. Thus, the prophet Isaiah was able to say:

⁹⁶ *After Death*, 46-7.

⁹⁷ 1 Peter 1:18-20. Author’s emphasis.

⁹⁸ 1 John 1:7, 9. Author’s emphasis.

*“Woe is me, for I am undone! **Because I am a man of unclean lips,** And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.”*⁹⁹

The prophet Isaiah identified himself with the unclean environment of the Israelites with whom he lived:

*“**But we are all** like an unclean thing,
And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags;
We all fade as a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind,
Have taken us away.”*¹⁰⁰

In a similar way, Daniel, the great man of God, prayed in a very humble way:

*“And I prayed to the LORD my God, and made confession, and said, ‘O Lord, great and awesome God... **we have sinned and committed iniquity,** we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments... O Lord, righteousness belongs to You, **but to us shame of face...**”*¹⁰¹

Consistent with the examples of men in the Old Testament, the apostle Paul confessed about himself:

*“This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save **sinners, of whom I am chief.**”*¹⁰²

Here is yet another clear refutation by the early apostles to the claim of sacred tradition that a person’s own goodness and righteousness can save himself:

*“**But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us,** through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that **having been justified by His grace** we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”*¹⁰³

While Scripture clearly teaches that people can be saved only through God’s mercy, not their own, Eastern Orthodoxy teaches otherwise. For example, the gold which St. Basil gave to the angels was very useful in paying for the redemption from the sins of the

⁹⁹ Isaiah 6:5. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Isaiah 64:6. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁰¹ Daniel 9:4-5, 7. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁰² 1 Timothy 1:15. Author’s emphasis.

¹⁰³ Titus 3:4-7. Author’s emphasis.

Venerable Theodora. This is what Orthodoxy alleges to have occurred at some of the toll houses:

“As we were rising from the earth to the heights of heaven, we were first met by the spirits of the first torment. Here the souls are tormented for the sins of idle speech; this is, for speaking without thinking, or speaking what is vile and shameless, or speaking without need or order. We stopped, and many scrolls were brought out on which there were recorded all the words that I had uttered from my youth on, either needlessly or unreasonably; and especially when such words expressed anything unclean or blasphemous, as young people frequently bear on their tongue... Now I kept silent, as if I had lost my voice. I was unable to reply because the evil spirits accused me rightly. But while I was silent in my shame and trembled with fear, the holy angels **offered some of my good deeds and, since these were not enough, they added something from the treasure given me by the holy man Basil; and thus they paid my debts at this station.**

Thence we ascended [to the second tollhouse] and drew near the torment of lying... Here the holy angels put down for my sins some of my good deeds, but the prayers of my spiritual father did even more to save me. We went on.

We reached the [third] station where souls answer for speaking evil of others and spreading rumors about them... **Here also the angels freed me by means of the prayers of the holy man Basil,** and we continued to ascend.

We reached the [fourth] station where gluttony is punished... I was trembling at the sight of such accusations and did not know how to object. But the holy angels **took out enough from what was given to us by the holy man Basil, balanced my sins with this** and set me free.

During this conversation we reached the [fifth] station of sloth, where sinners are accused of all those days and hours which they spent in idleness... I too was accused there of much and **could not have freed myself if the holy angels had not balanced my deficiencies by the gifts of the holy man Basil.**

During our conversation we approached the [sixteenth] torment of fornication... They brought out the records of all my deeds of fornication and accused me by pointing out the persons, the places, and the times: with whom, when, and where I sinned in my youth... The angels put down many of my good deeds **but even more did they take from the gift given us by the holy man Basil;** barely did I save myself from great grief.

We reached the [seventeenth] torment of adultery... I too had a great debt here; the evil spirits already had accused me and were about to tear me from the arms of the angels, but the angels began to argue with them and show them all my later labors and good deeds. After some **time they rescued me, but with difficulty, and not so much by my good deeds, all of which, down to the last,**

they deposited here—but rather by the treasure of my father Basil, from which they also took very much to put on the scale to balance my iniquities. Then they took me and we went on.

But here we were met by the evil spirits of the last [twentieth] torment, the station that tests lack of compassion and cruelty of heart... We, however, by the grace of Christ, passed this place without trouble, for **we were helped by the prayers of the holy man Basil.**”¹⁰⁴

Such wonderful help by St. Basil on behalf of the soul of Theodora led the angels to the following conclusion:

“As they traveled, the holy angels were talking among themselves: ‘Truly, what great help did this soul receive from Basil, the friend of God. If he had not assisted her with his good deeds and prayers, she would have suffered much torment when passing through the toll-houses... But even these [the angels escorting Theodora’s soul] could not have passed through the tollhouses without the redemptive gift of the Venerable Basil.’”¹⁰⁵

What is surprising about this "truth" realized by the angels is that even this “self-sacrificing follower of Christ” could not enter Heaven because of her sinfulness on her own. She needed assistance from those who were still alive. (During Theodora’s travel on the way through the tollhouses, St. Basil was still alive and offered her assistance. He prayed for her soul and his good works redeemed her sins.)

So then another question arises: how can many other Orthodox believers, who are nowhere even close to being such “followers of Christ” like the nun, neither who serve a spiritual elder who can assist their souls with gold from his “wallet”, have any hope for entering Heaven?

The strangest implication of this teaching in the Eastern Orthodox Churches comes to this extreme. Even “the Most Holy Mother of God” herself was afraid of her death because she, too, would have to pass through the spiritual tollhouses:

“Second, we learn how she, in her prayer, prayed for a quick departure from this life that her soul, at the time of her separation from the body, not see the prince of darkness and his horrors, and hidden from the dark regions not encounter the power of Satan. **Do you see how terrible it is for the soul to pass through the toll-gates [mitarstva]! When she**, who gave birth to the Destroyer of Hades and, who herself has frightening power over demons **prayed thusly, what then is left for us?**”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Translator’s note: see <http://orthodoxinfo.com/death/theodora.aspx> . Author’s note: *After Death*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Translator’s note: see <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.cgi> . Author’s note: Velimirovic, *Prologue of Okhrid*, August 15, 583. Author’s emphasis.

As a reminder of what the Orthodox Churches teach about the Holy Virgin Mary, let us cite the elder Cleopas who clearly states that Mary rules over all of creation:

“Do you know who the Mother of the Lord is? She is the Queen of the Cherubim, the Empress over all creation, the Vessel of the incarnation of the Lord, the Door of holiness, the Door of life, the One of whose closed doors no one can enter except our Lord Jesus Christ. She is the ladder to heaven, the divine lamp, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Mother of the Lord is the Bride of the Father, the mother of the Logos (word) and of the Church of the Divine Spirit.”¹⁰⁷

So Bishop Nikolai forces the question: if the “Mother of God”, who has so much power in the universe, had fear before demons with whom she was supposed to meet after death, then what hope could any mere mortal person have?

Based on everything mentioned so far, it is clear that the Orthodox dogma of salvation through good works and religious deeds fails not only to secure peace and security during one’s earthly life. Orthodoxy gives a person no clarity as to whether or not God accepts that person. However, Orthodoxy also leaves a miserable person who dies at the “mercies” of bloodthirsty demons who are dubbed “lords”. Such nonexistent “lords” exact “celestial custom taxes” on the one hand, while on the other hand, people are commanded to pray for the souls of the deceased. How far off the mark Orthodox teaching compares with the wonderful truth that Christ preached. He preached that every believer who is born of the Spirit has absolute assurance of his salvation. The believer belongs to the Lord both during his earthly life and after death!¹⁰⁸

However, it is critical not to forget yet one more very important and interesting teaching. Namely, as often happens with Eastern Orthodoxy, the absence of biblical evidence to substantiate a particular doctrine forces Orthodox teachers to resort to citing teachings of the holy fathers, or apocryphal books. Here is an excerpt from the life of St. Basil the New, who alleges that Scripture teaches the forgiveness of sins can be obtained through giving alms to the poor:

“People who are distracted by earthly vanities worry about daily food and drink without the fear of God. Their god is their stomach, not God, and they do not care about the future of their lives, neither the warnings of Scripture, which says: *‘Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.’* (Luke 6:25) They view Holy Scripture as a fable, and they live in safety and without worry, enjoying every day just like the rich man in the Gospel. **But those among them who are merciful and compassionate, and who do kind deeds for the poor and downtrodden – they will easily find forgiveness from God for their sins and can easily pass through the tollhouses without fear because of their charitable deeds, for the**

¹⁰⁷ *Holy Prince Lazar*, Volume 1 [25], 146.

¹⁰⁸ See these verses: John 3:16, 36; 11:25-6; Romans 8:31-9; 14:7-8; 1 John 5:11-13.

Bible says: ‘For alms delivers from death, and the same is that which purges away sins, and makes to find mercy and life everlasting.’ (Tobit 12:9 – Apocrypha) Those who do not care that alms cleanse their sins cannot go to these trials in peace. They will be seized by the lords of the tollhouses.”¹⁰⁹

So, we see that Eastern Orthodoxy teaches the doctrine that forgiveness of sins can be obtained through giving alms to the poor. Such doctrine, based upon salvation by works, contradicts God’s Word! The true canonical books of the Bible contradict salvation by works as valid before God. Thus, Eastern Orthodoxy must parade out the apocryphal book of Tobit, which was written around the times of the Old Testament. Tobit was written in the third or fourth century B.C. Tobit describes stories that were alleged to have occurred within a family of Jews who lived in the diaspora after the collapse of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C. The words quoted above were allegedly spoken by an angel named Rafael, who is never mentioned in the Bible. In contrast with what God’s Word teaches, it is obvious that this “angel” teaches doctrine completely opposite to the Lord’s instruction. Rafael claims there exist a legion of spirits without physical bodies and spiritual tollhouses that test the departed souls of Christ’s faithful – similar to the dream of Gregory.

The Apostle Paul clearly warns Christians not to accept everything taught from the “other side” of life as being of divine origin:

*“And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”*¹¹⁰

Neither the Lord Jesus Christ nor the apostles ever quoted or taught the lessons from the book of Tobit. Tobit was not included in the canon of the Jewish Old Testament books nor was it read in the synagogues.¹¹¹ It is clear that they did not consider its spiritual message to be authentic or divinely inspired.

Let us examine further evidence that Eastern Orthodoxy teaching on the fate of people after death is based on the dogma of salvation through good works. The next section will also reveal evidence that such teachings (like many other teachings in the Eastern Orthodox Churches) originates from unclean, evil spirits instead of God’s holy angels.

Parastas (Memorial Services for the Dead)

Regarding the cult of the dead, Eastern Orthodoxy devised the memorial for the dead, an official memorial service that is better known as “the wake”.¹¹² As can be expected, this practice of memorials for the dead has no basis in the teaching of Holy Scripture.

¹⁰⁹ *After Death* Author’s emphasis. [Translator’s note: see <http://www.westsrbdio.org/prolog/prolog.cgi> , August 26. Serbian Orthodox Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic recognizes Venerable Basil the New as a legitimate saint within Orthodoxy. Thus, those who deny his testimony about tollhouses must also deny the authority transmitted in sacred tradition.]

¹¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 11:14.

¹¹¹ See the introductory notes on the Old Testament books in *Today’s Contemporary Bible* (Roman Catholic Translation), (Zagreb, 1983), 1194.

¹¹² Translator’s note: Russians know it as “panikhida”, Greeks as “parastas”.

Rather, it is based entirely on tradition, which, “coincidentally”, derives its origins from Greek polytheistic religion. Here is how Eastern Orthodoxy explains memorials for the dead:

“Secondly, focused exclusively on prayer for the rest of the departed souls of Christians, is the memorial service for the dead. Typically, such services occur **on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after the person’s death**... People who attend memorial services know it as the ‘wake’. The service is scheduled at a specific time on a specific day without fail. Forty days after death is a special time. **The tradition of our Holy Church** teaches us that this is the day when the Kingdom of God holds a special tribunal for departed souls. The soul will receive either temporal reward or punishment consistent with that person’s faith and deeds as well as the prayers of our Holy Church for that person’s salvation from eternal damnation. Those prayers come from our people who are still living. In this manner, the memorials are performed forty days after the person’s death, or at the latest one day afterward.”¹¹³

So, according to the teachings of Eastern Church, the third, ninth and fortieth days after death are very important for the departed souls of Christians! For further information on Eastern Orthodox teaching on life after death, let us read a lengthy excerpt from the writings of St. Macarius of Alexandria, who lived in the fourth century after Christ. The excerpt is an answer received by St. Macarius allegedly from an angel of God regarding the importance of holding memorials for the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after a person’s death. This excerpt also clearly demonstrates the importance of the patristic tradition to Eastern Orthodoxy:

“One time, St. Macarius of Alexandria asked a question of the Angel who escorted him in the desert: ‘Why did the Holy Fathers pass on to the Church the teaching that she should conduct a memorial service for the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth day? How does it benefit the soul of the deceased?’ The Angel replied: ‘God never passed on to the Church anything that was unnecessary and useless. When the Church offers a memorial service on the third day, then the soul of the deceased receives from the angel miraculous comfort from the sorrow of separation from the body. The soul receives comfort because he sees that the separation is done for the glory of God and the Church, and in this he receives hope. For two days, the soul hovers around the earth. Naturally, the soul loves the body (where the soul dwelled in earthly life). Sometimes, the soul wanders around the house where he had dwelled in earthly life, sometimes the soul roams around the grave where the body is buried. The soul spends these two days like a bird building its nest. The soul that performed good works visits places where truth was formed within him. On the third day, He who had resurrected from the dead commanded that every Christian soul, modeled after His resurrection, should ascend into Heaven and worship God in everything. **Thus, the Church performs a good ritual in giving sacrifice and prayer for the soul on the third day.**”

¹¹³ *Catechism in the Home*, (Belgrade, 1991) 98-99. Author’s emphasis.

After worshiping God, God orders the angels to show the soul the variety and beauty of the Saints and the holy beauty of Heaven. This six day tour leads the soul to worship and praise God, the Creator of everything. After observing all this, the soul forgets its grief of separation from the body. But if the soul is guilty of sin by viewing the blessings of the Saints, the soul breaks down in tears, saying: ‘Woe is me! How much time I wasted in the world! Having pursued the lusts of the flesh, instead I could have spent much of my life with peace of mind to serve God properly. Then I would have been worthy of grace and glory. Woe is me... And after viewing the six days of joy the Righteous Angels again extol the worship of God. **Yet again, the Church does the right thing in performing the ninth day of ministry and commemoration of the dead.** After the second session of worship, the Ruler (Lord) of all commands the angels to take the soul to Hell and reveal all the local places of torture, its various departments, and various unclean torments that cause the souls of sinners there to constantly wail and gnash their teeth. The soul trembles and endures these various places of torment over thirty days, even though the soul itself is not sentenced to imprisonment in them. On the fortieth day, the soul once again ascends to worship God, and the Judge has already determined where the soul will stay according to the deeds of that person. **Thus, the Church does well to perform the fortieth day of commemoration for the deceased.**”¹¹⁴

Not only does the above text oppose the Bible’s teaching on life after death, but it also apparently contradicts the Orthodox teaching on spiritual tollhouses cited earlier. According to the earlier revelation to Theodora, the baptized soul after death travels to Heaven over several weeks along a spiritual road where there are located demonic customs houses. Her vision does not mention any incident of worship before God’s throne on the third or ninth day after death.

The second revelation given by the “angel” to St. Macarius reveals that for two days, souls can freely wander the earth, after which with the angels they spend six days in Heaven, and finally they spend thirty days in Hell. Nevertheless, this revelation makes no mention of the tollhouses!

It is critical for us to know that the revelation to St. Macarius dates from the IV century, while the revelation of tollhouses dates from the X century after Christ. Thus, St. Macarius was unable to write about tollhouses of which he was unaware, because this doctrine was introduced into Orthodox teaching only six centuries after his death. St. Macarius is solely interested in the reason for observing memorials for the dead. We have already read the angel’s answer. However, putting aside such a statement from a “higher power”, let us look for a more realistic answer from earthly historical sources. We arrive at a completely different explanation.

¹¹⁴ *After Death*. Author’s emphasis. [Translator’s note: see Russian translation from Greek in <http://www.zaistinu.ru/articles/?aid=316> .]

First, let us recall the statement of Russian Orthodox priest and theologian Alexander Schmemmann about the celebration of Christmas (see chapter 7).

“The main method which the church used to attract pagans to Christianity was a method of sublimation and **transformation of the pagan beliefs themselves; the Church adapted some pagan customs and invested them with Christian meaning and content.**” ¹¹⁵

Now let us read about some pagan rites that were transformed and invested with Christian meaning. The answer to this question will be given by the Orthodox historian Eusebius Popovic:

“Specific to this rite, they conducted religious services for the peace of deceased souls (‘All Souls Day’) with the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice, if possible, next to the grave. This rite had the symbolism of showing love to the souls of the deceased (‘agape’ for the soul as a free gift) and was usually held **on the third, seventh or ninth, thirtieth or fortieth day**, and also on the one year anniversary of the death or funeral. The numbers seven and thirty as well as the one year anniversary were chosen as specific final conditions of weeks, months, and years after the death or burial of the deceased.

Now they might have chosen to associate the third, ninth, and fortieth days with Christ: the third day related to His resurrection on the third day, the fortieth day in relation to His ascension to Heaven, and the ninth day related as the product of three in order to emphasize His resurrection on the third day three times.

But such is not the case. **The pagan Greeks offered sacrifices to their dead on the third, ninth, and thirtieth days** as well as on the anniversary of a person’s death.” ¹¹⁶

Besides that mentioned above, A.G. Hamman in his book *Rome and the First Christians* describes traditions held by Christians that bore a remarkable resemblance to those followed by pagans:

“Similar to their fellow countrymen, the believers in Greece observed memorials on the third, ninth, and fortieth day after the death of a person. In Rome, the ritual was observed on the ninth day after burial – after which they held a meal in which relatives and friends gathered... **Like the pagans, Christians organized holidays in honor of the deceased called ‘refrigeria’ (refreshment).**” ¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Text from the special supplement “Christmas” on the page of *Today* (excerpt from the book *The Sacrament of Holidays* by Alexander Schmemmann), 2002, 6. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹⁶ *General Church History*, Vol. 1, 437. Author’s emphasis.

¹¹⁷ A.G. Hamman, *Rome and the First Christians* (Belgrade, 1998) 178. Author’s emphasis.

So we learn that the pagan Greeks observed the practice of memorial services for the souls of the dead on the third, ninth, and fortieth days after death. It becomes very clear that the “Church” invested some Christian meaning to this custom. Indeed, this is a much more robust explanation than believing some alleged revelation to St. Macarius by some angel! Such a conclusion is even more obvious when we consider that the Bible contains not a single trace of such teaching!

What also becomes apparent is the fact that tradition gives especial meaning to the fortieth day after the death of a deceased soul throughout the centuries (including the “Christianization” of pagan faiths). This tradition existed in the Church during the Middle Ages, a time when St. Basil the New and his disciples lived. This is why the soul of the venerable Theodora, after she passed by the tollhouses and then was led through Hell, could tell Gregory in a dream that she was resting in Heaven on the fortieth day after her death – the very time when St. Basil was conducting a memorial service on Earth on her behalf.¹¹⁸

However, the assimilation of pagan practices by some Christian churches and movements and dressing them in Christian attire (for the sake of “converting” pagans) was not only an ancient custom, but it still occurs today. Let us examine evidence presented by Roman Miz:

“The population of the whole series of countries in Central Africa, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly polytheistic, now profess Christianity or subscribes to the so-called ‘new African movements’ – **syncretistic concoctions that successfully combine elements of Christianity with those of traditional tribal religions.** In China, even very superficial and inadequate statistics testify to the presence of tens of millions of Christians. Rising interest in Christianity continues in Northeast Asia. In contrast, the ‘Christian bastions’ of Europe at the end of the century do not look invincible at all... The “de-Europeanization” of Christianity is not only a process confined to geography but also extends to sociology and culture, perhaps to an even greater degree... Differences pertain not only to specifics of rituals, religious architecture, or devotional differences, **but also the doctrinal issues that concern the very essence of the doctrine of the Christian religion. For example, in Japan, the Catholic Mass conducts memorials for the dead on**

¹¹⁸ This is the whole passage: “Then they brought me out from there [from Hell], and they brought me to the dwelling of our Venerable Father Basil, you see, and they comforted me by telling me: ‘Now the Venerable Basil is commemorating you.’ And it was clear to me that I was in this place forty days after the separation of my soul from my body...’ **According to the teaching of the Church,** the fortieth day after the separation of the soul from the body marks the completion of the passage through the tollhouses, there will be a particular judgment of the soul that will render a provisional sentence: either the soul stays either in the place of joy or else in the place of torment, where the soul remains until the second coming of the Lord to the earth and God’s Last Judgment over people.” *The Way of the Soul after Death: about Tollhouses*, (1995: Chelije Monastery). Author’s emphasis.

the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, and thirtieth anniversary after the death of a person – identical to Buddhism.”¹¹⁹

Thus far in this section, we have seen evidence that the teachings of Eastern Orthodoxy on life after death are false. Neither the visions of tollhouses, nor of souls worshipping God on the third, ninth, and fortieth day after a person's death, not even the necessity of a church holding memorial services to pray for deceased souls have any foundation whatsoever in Scripture.

The last section of this chapter will examine some very interesting visions, dreams and experiences allegedly had by dead Orthodox believers. Analysis of these fables will give the reader complete confidence in the thesis proposed at the beginning of this chapter. Eastern Orthodox teachings about life after death are utterly unbiblical (or, more accurately, anti-Biblical).

Other Visions and Dreams

All the examples listed below are based solely on dreams, visions, and other "revelations" received by Orthodox Christians (both saints-monks and laypeople). Along with the teachings of the Holy Fathers, the decisions of the Councils and other rules for religious life, these "revelations" comprise so-called "Sacred Tradition". (See the citation from St. Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic in chapter 1 of this book.) They are unable to supply even one text from Holy Scripture as adequate support for any of these traditions. On the other hand, it will be easy to recognize that many of these traditions are simply opposite to the revelation recorded in the Scriptures.

Angelic Errors in Killing the Wrong Person

Orthodox faith teaches that over the course of the entire history of the Christian Church there occurred some things that are truly amazing. The issue is that angelic beings demonstrate their imperfections and inadequate understanding of the Lord's commands. They often find themselves in the situation where they must atone for their crimes. Here are several stories of which Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic wants us to believe in their godly truth that relate the experience of believers who were murdered by the errors of angels:

“In 1910 in the vicinity of Pozharevac occurred an unforgettable event which testifies to the infinite existence of the soul. There lies a village in the vicinity called Mali Crnic, and another village called Kula. In the summer of 1910, a man by the name of Stevan was very ill in Mali Crnic. He suffered and died. He had been dead for 24 hours, and they brought him to the funeral. A grave has been dug out. The funeral party carrying his body was large. His wife was crying. As they approached the cemetery, just before they were to step through the gate, the dead Stevan began to tremble as if he were alive. People attending the funeral

¹¹⁹ Roman Miz, *Christianity on the Edge of the Third Millenium*, (Novi Sad, 2000) 17-8. Author's emphasis.

were terrified and ran away. Stevan get up from the stretcher and returned to his home. They asked him what happened to them, and whether he was actually dead. Stevan explained: ‘I was truly dead, and my soul traversed that world, until he arrived at a place where he was forbidden to enter. **He heard some elder say: ‘Not the Stevan of Crnic, but the Stevan from Kula.’ And my soul returned to my body before entering the cemetery.**”¹²⁰

“In the Wallachian village Magarevo near Bitola, there is a slight man named Costa who is roughly 60 years old. When he was about 30 years old, he fell ill and died. He was dead for 24 hours. When he died, three angels came and led him through the spiritual realm. They came to one place and encountered Satan, who said, ‘Go, child, and drink some water. You are thirsty.’ Costa replied: ‘Get away from me, Satan! For 3 years I fasted for my Lord Jesus Christ.’ He bent down to pick up stones to throw at him. Then he went on, crossed the bridge, and entered Heaven. There, he kissed the right hand of Christ. ‘It is good that you arrived, O my soul!’ said Christ. They took Costa to the judgment seat of Christ. But Christ said to the angels, “**You made a mistake in bringing this man. You were supposed to bring the other Kosta from the same village.**”¹²¹

“In Trstenik, in the village Bogdanje during the night between December 10 and 11, 1929, according to the church calendar, there occurred a rare and glorious event:

A man from Bogdanje, Mikhail Avakumovich Kovac, woke up around midnight to visit his little forge. It was an unusually quiet night. The clock on the church in Trstenik struck midnight. Mikhail returned to his room. His wife stood up just then to perform some work. When Michael falls asleep, there came a young man by the age of 18, unusual-looking and bright-faced, and said, ‘Miko, let’s go, the hour has come! The Lord has commanded you.’ Michael immediately went to the young man who was on his right side. So they came to a large meadow with grass unusually beautiful. The eyes could not fully take it all in. There appeared three paths at one place. The middle was decorated with fine precious stones. The left path did not appear so attractive. His companion led him through the middle way.

We traveled eastward in the direction of one large tree. We see in the East the rays of the sun of unusual greatness. Under the tree was a throne under which an unusual man was sitting. He was no more than 32 years old. His hair was long and even at the ends. His face shone and emanated wisdom. He said to my companion: ‘Why have you brought this man?’ My companion replied that the Lord commanded him to do so. Then the man opened an unusually large book that stood in front of the throne. There he found my name written down, and said: ‘**You got the wrong Mikhail! Michael is supposed to live 86 years on**

¹²⁰ Holy Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *Does the Soul Exist?* (Svetilo), 20-1. Author’s emphasis.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 22-3. Author’s emphasis.

the earth and die peacefully! The Lord commanded you to get Kosta Ivanovic from Stragar. Bring Michael home at once!”¹²²

Orthodoxy teaches that angels are capable of making mistakes in obeying God's commandments. Mistakes could involve confusion over taking a man with the same name from the same village, but with the wrong surname. Other times, the angels can take a person with the same name but from the wrong village. Sometimes, accidents occur where the angel fouls up both the name and the village of the person.

We can freely ask several questions. What would have happened had the angels mistakenly proclaimed the birth of John the Baptist to someone else besides Zechariah? Or what would have happened had the angel Gabriel proclaimed the birth of the Savior to a different Mary, or another virgin with a completely different name in a different village other than Nazareth? What would have happened if the angels were to have had announced the birth of Christ not to the shepherds of Bethlehem, but rather to the pig farmers in the Gadarene region? Or if they had proclaimed the Savior would have been born in Bethany or Beth Fagi, but not in Bethlehem?

Although angelic beings do not possess the quality of perfection which God possesses, not one single word of Holy Scripture allows for even the slightest possibility of these events taught by Eastern Orthodoxy. The Bible contains not one single shred of evidence for angels doing the wrong job and misunderstanding God's commands.

God's Word says much about angels who deliberately disobeyed and sinned. Scriptures discuss the fallen angels – Satan's demons – that use all kinds of tactics to deceive people, particularly religious farces. So as we examine these events that talk about short periods of death (also including statements that those who do not fast and pray will spend 40 years in Hell, and also the experience of Kosta from Magarev with the temptation of the Devil¹²³), it becomes apparent that all these events bear more resemblance to occult spirituality than God's revelation.

In a moment, we will examine how these statements are completely incompatible with the Scriptures.

Visions of Life in Heaven and Hellish Torments of Sinners

According to Bishop Nikolai, that is, the people who related to him these stories, the life of the soul after death differs dramatically from what the Bible tells us. Here is what the girl Milka Cairovic of the village Borcha near Kragujevac tells us:

“My eyes were opened to see who took me: two girls in white dresses. There was a square table on which were laid 3 open books. **And there was a large key on the edge of one book.** An elder who looked like a priest stood beside the table. I went up to him, bowed down, and kissed his hand. He said to me:

¹²² *Ibid.*, 13-4. Author's emphasis.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

‘Milka, you were alive! **I am St. Peter.** Come in and take a look at what God’s Heaven looks like.’ But I thought to myself: how could I go into that world so inadequately dressed? When I considered that I was so unworthy, there appeared a large mirror in front of me. I looked into the mirror and gasped as I saw white silk on myself as well as being worn by a great mass of people. Some time passed, and then I heard **church bells.** There was endless light and then all the girls dressed in silk entered the church. Everyone went in three by three. The girls say nothing and just stare at me. One of them recognized me and said: ‘It is Milka, who attends church every week.’ I looked and recognized who she was. It was my friend Milunika Jovanovic, my teacher from the seventh grade. She had died five years ago. We kept walking until we came to a tree with three types of leaves: gold, green, and black. My guide on the left side explained to me the tree: ‘**This is the tree in the midst of God’s Paradise called the Tree of Life.** The world is sustained by it. **The golden foliage symbolizes friends of God on the earth. The green foliage represents average godly people. The black foliage represents unhappy people who curse God.**’ We walk by the tree of life and meet some older people sitting on a throne. They are dressed in purple, green, and crimson. Their conversation dots the air. Before them stand all kinds of food and drink. I asked myself why these people are not eating when there is such abundance. My guide read my thought and told me: ‘**These people only eat three times a year: Christmas, Easter, and the Day of the Holy Trinity.**’ We continued walking by the tables when I recognized my grandmother, who had died two months ago. Her name is Zhivana. When she saw me, she recognized me and said, ‘This is my granddaughter Milka!’ **She wore a belt and told me, ‘I wear this belt at the request of Maksim. He was buried without a belt.’** In fact, this was true. **The mother of my mother always complained how a person in that world could die without a belt.’**¹²⁴

After these visions of paradise (including places of worship, church bells, the tree of life with colorful leaves, and her grandmother who wanted her late husband to wearing his belt - because it is improper to be buried without one), St Peter sends Milka to see what Hell looks like. In addition, he gave her money to pay the demons to enter and exit from Hell in the event they did not want to let her leave:

“Once again I came to St. Peter, and he said, ‘Oh, Milka, did you see God’s Paradise? Did you see the books? The first book contains names written with golden letters. These are people who gave to the monastery. And the black letters indicate those people who did not give to the monastery. Here in black letters is written what your grandfather promised to give the Vrachevsnica Monastery, but he never gave. The second book, the Book of Life, contains the names of those who are in God’s Paradise. The third book, the Book of the Dead, contains names of those who are dead to God because they are in Hell. **This is the money you gave to the churches and churches as offerings. Let us go and look at what Hell looks like. Here is a pair of coins, just in case you need to pay to get out of Hell...**’ We came up to **two black beasts** and a

¹²⁴ Bishop Velimirovic, *Is There a Soul?* 8-9. Author’s emphasis.

sea between them through which to pass. I was scared. But my guide explained to me: ‘Do not fear! Only those who are sinful are taken and thrown into Hell.’ We passed in between them, and they did not look at us. We found a hut. The door opened, and a woman came out from there. She said, ‘Here is Milka who attends church every week.’ I recognized her as Polka, the wife of Matija Uroshevich of Brestovica who had died 15 years ago. When we entered the gate, we saw a woman on a bed. Underneath her bed, a fire burns. And Polka threw various rocks at her, and she was in total pain. Polka told me, ‘Milka, I taught women not to have children, and God is punishing me by watching this martyr drown like a child.’ The woman on the bed told me, ‘Milka, I am Stoyka Arsenija Uroshevic, a woman from Brestovica. I strangled 24 children **either with shirts or socks or even worse**. And burning eternally, I am in intense pain.’ **She showed me to a door, where I heard wind and waves, and she said that there were millers and fortune tellers. The millers had dishonest scales. The fortune tellers put a hex on women so they could not make dough. The millers wear millstones, and the fortune tellers carry vats. We saw another gate. There was great wailing because those who curse and deny God fight each other. A third door appeared behind which was boiling tar and pitch. They told me there dwell great sinners who are doomed to boil in a cauldron.** I was unable to enter through the door.”¹²⁵

Any student of the Scriptures who reads this would be left speechless. Sinners who are boiled in the cauldron of pitch, millers with millstones, and wizards that carry tubs sound more like details from a movie rather than true divine revelation. What would the equivalent punishments in a modern society comprise today? Should a taxi driver, who charged a higher price by faking the odometer, be punished by pushing his car that ran out of fuel? Or maybe programmers of computer viruses and illegally broke into another’s computer should suffer punishment in Hell by bearing on their backs heavy outdated computer monitors? Or maybe athletes who cheated to get great results with doping should now be doomed to run a marathon for eternity? It is quite obvious that this view of Hell in no way corresponds to the biblical revelation. Indeed, it looks very similar to the old medieval primitive notions of the afterlife, only lacking the horned devil rapping the hooves on his feet, which is holding the triple set of doors and personally fueling the fire just below the boiling cauldrons filled with pitch! But to some extent, the “comic” details of life after death do not end here either. Here is new evidence and data that will be of particular interest to farmers (fruit growers) and botanists. Here is what “God” revealed to a Serbian farmer, Momir Jakovljevic, before World War II:

“The Lord showed me that the apple trees in Paradise are short. He told me that the apple trees on the earth are tall in order that women could not climb them. This is related to Eve’s sin.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11-2. Author’s emphasis.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

So now we know that not only are there short apple trees in heaven, but why the apple trees on earth are tall, allegedly! However, the question is, why not make them a little taller, because women still are able, without climbing, to stretch forth her hand and pick fruit (and thus repeat the act with which Eve sinned)?! Although Bishop Nikolai at the end of this presentation claims that "whoever has faith and recognizes the true signs of the faithful cannot have any doubts"¹²⁷, serious students of Scripture are bemused and wonder how this is all possible? Is there anyone that ignorant to actually believe these fairy tales?!

Other Miraculous Visions

This chapter will conclude with two examples of the fates of people after death. It will quickly become apparent that these tales resemble medieval notions of the afterlife and hardly at all something that could come from God. These examples are related to people who are hung upside down and so are doomed to more years, while others are bound to a pillar between Heaven and Hell. These texts teach that salvation is achieved by human merit, e.g. good works. Such teaching completely goes against the clear principles laid out in Scripture of salvation by grace alone in Christ alone:

“A devout soldier was dying and came back to life. He said that he saw a dark river and a bridge. Everything that he had in this life is needed in order for him to cross into the next. The righteous ones can cross freely, but sinners fall into the dark and smelly river. On the other side of the river he saw green meadows with fragrant flowers and grass, along with beautiful homes and people dressed in white robes... **Near the terrible river I saw the Abbot Peter, who died four years ago, chained and hanging upside down.** When I asked him why he was so tormented, he replied: ‘When I was commanded to punish offenders at the monastery, not only did I do enough to obey the command, but I went beyond it to satisfy my own cruel and inhuman character. That is why I am suffering like this.’... **The icon of Christ's Last Judgement shows a man tied to a pillar, facing the kingdom of heaven.** Such an image of the icon is not fiction, but is essentially revealed truth. During the reign of Emperor Leo in Constantinople lived a rich and famous man, who loved the poor very much, but was a slave to passionate lusts even in his old age. Unfortunately, he died without repentance. People began to debate the fate of the rich man’s soul before Bishop and Patriarch Hermogen. One of them argued for his works of mercy as redeeming him from trouble, while others argued that to enter into heaven required chastity and spiritual purity. He was one who sinned and never repented. As the Lord said, "What's found there, that I will judge." In order to address the resolution of this dispute before God, the Patriarch advised all the monks to pray to God to reveal the fate of the rich man. God heard the prayer of His servants. One of them, a monk – prisoner learned where the rich man was and in what condition. Calling the Patriarch, the prisoner in front of everybody said this: ‘Last night during a prayer to God I saw unspeakable graces, and on the left the lake of fire, whose flames reached the heavens. Between Heaven and the lake there was a

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

rich man tied to a pillar. He often looked to heaven, cried, and sobbed bitterly. I saw an angel who said, ‘Man, why do you wail in vain? **Your alms would have delivered you from trouble, but since you did not leave your shameful debauchery, you are deprived of paradise.** For the unclean cannot see God.’”

¹²⁸

Conclusion

The conclusion is obvious after studying the Orthodox belief on life after death. For all the pains that theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church take in believing the dogmas mentioned in this chapter, their teachings find no support from the Scriptures. In fact, Holy Scripture contradicts the teachings of Orthodoxy on this subject. Contrary to all superstition, folk belief, and the occult disclosures embedded within the teachings of "the One and Only Holy and Apostolic Church", evangelical Christians believe only in what God's Word teaches. Yet again, for the umpteenth time, my readers must clearly recognize why the Christian faith must discard the details from the teachings of later church authorities. These church authorities have no business in attempting to “complement” God’s clear revelation of the Book of books.

¹²⁸ *The Greatest Teacher*, 342-3. Author’s emphasis.