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## Prayers for the dead (Michael Bressemer, Ph.D.)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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A round white mound, frosted with powdered sugar and decorated with candied almonds, sits on top of a silver platter with a thin lit candle in the center of it. Is it someone's birthday? No, it's the anniversary of someone's death. It's the almost weekly macabre reminder of our eventual demise, decay, and doom.



Likely the strangest ritual a convert to Orthodoxy witnesses is the memorial service (a mnemosynon or panikhida) following the Divine Liturgy. Other than perhaps a vicar offering a brief petition at a grave side funeral for the departed—that the deceased may “rest in peace”—prayers for the dead are absent from Protestant practice. They tend to believe once someone passes from this life then it’s too late for them to receive God’s grace. So why does the Orthodox Church pray for the dead?

### An Intermediate State

The Orthodox Church asserts there is an intermediate state between our death and the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 2:2-16; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:11-15). The Bible gives evidence of the deceased being conscious (alert and aware). The spirits of Moses and Elijah appeared to and talked with Our Lord at His Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). In Christ’s parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” there is both communication and concern expressed by the deceased characters (Luke 16:19-31). Christ said to Martha, “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” (John 11:25-26). This verse affirms that though a man’s body may die his spirit still lives. St. Paul also taught the departed were alive with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:8; Ephesians 2:4-7; Philippians 1:21-23; Hebrews 12:1). Finally, the book of Revelation gives examples of the deceased worshiping and praying to God (Revelation 4:4,10-11; 5:8-10, 13; 6:9-11; 7:9-12).



Yet despite this evidence, Protestant Christians are fond of quoting Hebrews 9:27: “It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). However, this scripture does not necessarily refer to an immediate successive event. You could also say, “It is appointed for men to have one childhood, but after this they must work.” Though eventually men will need to settle down into a vocation, there could be many events between graduating from high school and having a long-term career: travel, military service, advanced education, getting married, etc. Or another interpretation of this verse is to view the “judgment” as God’s decision about what place or in what condition (e.g., Luke 16:19-31) the departed will temporarily await the final judgment.

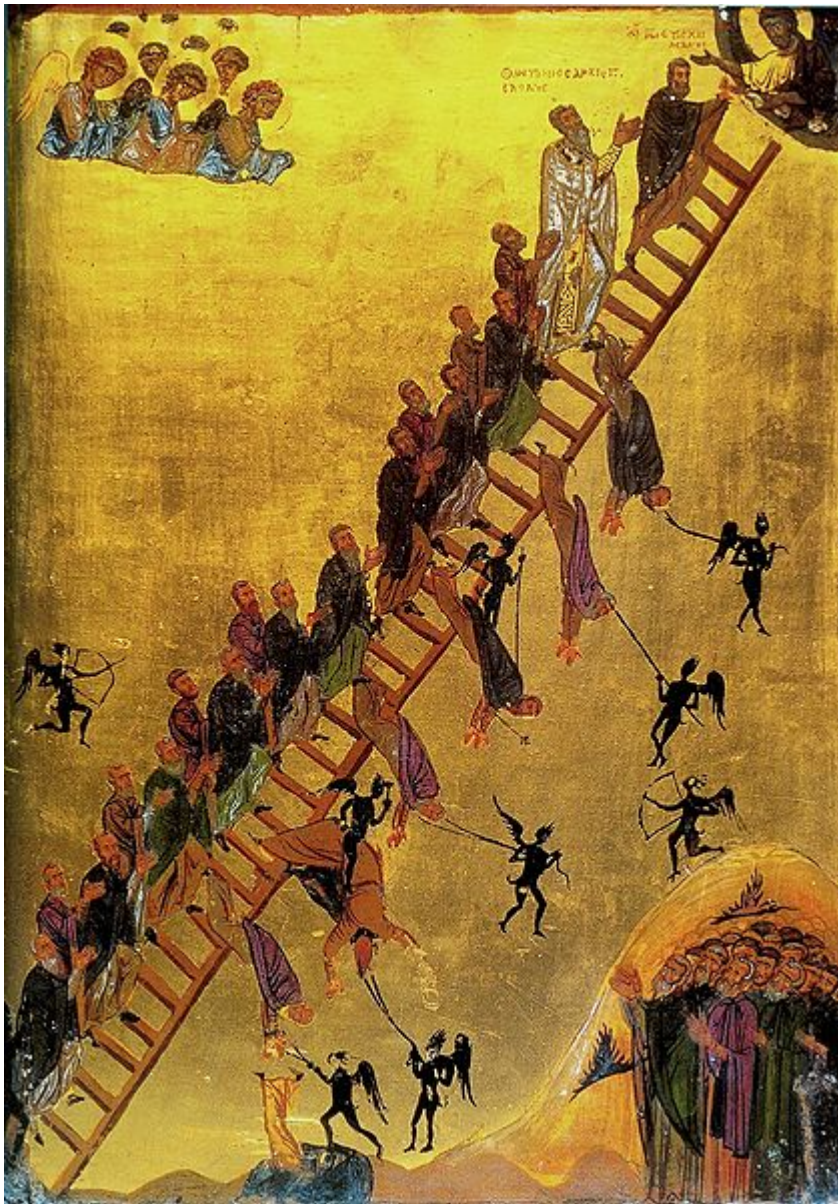
Other Western Christians believe the departed are not conscious but asleep (Mark 5:39; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6,18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:6,10). However, “asleep” is merely an idiom for physical death. The body can be asleep, awaiting to be awakened and resurrected at the final judgment, but the spirit (mind or nous) is still cognizant. Even in this life, you can be physically sleeping but still be conscious through having lucid dreams. The mind can be functioning even if the person is comatose. Those who have been pronounced dead but then revived have testified to “out of body experiences,” which gives credence to the spirit still being active after the heart has ceased beating. (For a fascinating discussion of this subject read “The Soul After Death” by

Fr. Seraphim Rose.)

Given that the spirit is conscious after death, and God is omnipresent (Psalm 138:7-12; Proverbs 15:3; Amos 9:2-3; Jeremiah 23:23-24), then there potentially exists interaction between mankind and God in the intermediate state. This is why Orthodox Christians beseech saints to pray for us. And if communication can exist in that direction, from the dead to God, why couldn't communication happen in the other direction, from God to the dead? This is exactly what did happen when Christ preached to the souls in hades.

### Descent into Hell

St. Peter stated that Christ preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19). It is believed many heeded that call and arose with Christ from the shattered gates of hell (Matthew 27:52-53). Some may think Christ only redeemed the Hebrew righteous men and women who died before the crucifixion of our Lord; however, it is the Tradition of the Orthodox Church that Christ raised all those who responded to our Savior's preaching in hell. In fact, many Orthodox hymn writers and theologians assert Christ emptied the prison of death. For example, St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) wrote using the voice of Sheol (death personified): "That Lamb filled the graves for me / This one empties the graves that had been full / Blessed is He who has conquered me / And brought life to the dead to His own glory!" (Hymn 36).



In the West, St. Augustine (354-430), because he held to the idea of predestination, questioned whether any except the righteous before Noah's flood were delivered from the dead. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) later asserted only the Old Testament righteous were set free from hell. Aquinas' position became the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, it is Orthodox Patristic Tradition that anyone who pleased God with their good works and who responded to Christ's gospel preaching in hell were raised from the dead. (For an extensive scholarly presentation of this subject read "Christ the Conqueror of Hell" by Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev.)

We tend to think of Christ's preaching to the dead in the past tense. However, the Orthodox Church believes Christ's salvation not only applies to a specific time in history but extends past and forward to all time. When we partake of the Eucharist, we do not symbolically re-enact nor merely remember Christ's sacrifice two

millennia ago; rather, we mysteriously participate in an event that is eternally present. Is the same true of Christ's preaching to the dead in hades? The Orthodox Church doesn't take a dogmatic position that says "Yes," but She doesn't say "No" either. Whether the recent dead also benefit from Christ's preaching in hell is something God has chosen not to reveal to us.

What we do know is Christ's redemption of the deceased illustrates the great compassion of God, who "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't just extend His grace to the few "elect" as many Protestants believe, but He gives mercy to everyone, even perhaps to those who didn't have a chance to hear or fully respond to the gospel message while walking on this earth (Ezekiel 37:1-14?). This gives hope our deceased loved ones may still benefit from our prayers for them.

Many Protestants will counter if the dead are given another chance to draw nearer to Christ then that would diminish the fervency needed to heed Our Lord's command to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). Why should we concern ourselves with evangelism and missions if after death anyone could have their state improved by our prayers for them? However, this is like saying, "I don't need to teach my children to be virtuous Christians; they will get another chance to hear the gospel from a chaplain in the county jail after they break the law." What compassionate parent would want their child to suffer even one day in the hellish nightmare of prison if it can be prevented? The imperative that we share the gospel is an act done out of love for humanity, than having the threat of blood being on our hands if we don't convince others to turn to Christ (as taught by some Protestants).

Also consider the dead don't have the opportunity to do good deeds after they breathe their last breath. This is another reason it is important the living receive the gospel message (Matthew 11:20-24; John 9:4). However, though my child sitting in a prison cell doesn't have the opportunity to be a good citizen and reap the rewards thereof; yet my petitions to the warden, the parole board, or the governor may improve the chance my child will be given clemency. And if we, mere humans, have such compassion for others then how much more will God have compassion for us (Matthew 7:7-11)?

### Biblical Examples

The Old Testament passage most commonly given in support for praying for the dead is from 2 Maccabees 12:43-45. Judas led his army to pray for their fallen

comrades that their sin may “be completely blotted out.” A sin offering was also taken for the fallen, and “in doing so he acted properly and with honor, taking note of the resurrection. For if he were not looking for the resurrection of those fallen, it would have been utterly foolish to pray for the departed.” Indeed, it is Jewish custom to pray for the dead even to this day. Known as a Kaddish in Aramaic, it is a prayer of sanctification in order that the deceased may still have the opportunity to be made holy.

2 Timothy 1:16-18 is a New Testament passage that can also be cited in support of praying for the dead. St. Paul prays Onesiphorus would “find mercy from the Lord.” Onesiphorus is referred to in the past tense, as if deceased, and St. Paul doesn’t extend his wish of mercy to anyone else in the household—those still alive (2 Timothy 4:19).

Yet, perhaps more compelling than the above two passages is the fact Elijah prays, “O Lord my God, let the soul of this child come back to him,” and then a widow’s son is resurrected from the dead (3 Kingdoms 17:17-24). Jesus Christ also prayed to His Father before raising Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:41-44). Consider also when Christ sent forth His disciples He commanded them to “raise the dead” (Matthew 10:8) and that doing so would have necessitated prayer. An example of which is when St. Peter prayed for Tabitha and she arose from the dead (Acts 9:36-42). These are clear Scriptural examples of the efficacy of prayer for the deceased.

Sanctification doesn’t happen instantly but is an ongoing process (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is no reason to assume the process ends with death because few people achieve sinless perfection (Matthew 5:48) in this lifetime. Therefore, it only makes sense we continue to pray for the departed in much the same way we pray for the sanctification of our living brothers and sisters (1 Thessalonians 5:23). From an earthly perspective, we tend to separate the living from the dead; but from a heavenly perspective, “He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him” (Luke 20:38).

## Church Tradition

There are plenty of examples that the early Church prayed for the dead. Tertullian (160-220), St. Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), St. Ephrem of Syria (306-373), St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379), St. Ambrose of Milan (337-397), St. John Chrysostom (347-407) and many other Church Fathers make mention of praying for the dead. The Roman historian Eusebius (262-339) stated that Church priests offered prayers for the soul of the first Christian emperor, St. Constantine, after his death in 337. Since the early Church adopted much of the worship style of the Hebrew religion, it is

natural that the Church would continue the Jewish practice of praying for the dead.

The first widely accepted liturgy of the Church, attributed to St. James, the stepbrother of Our Lord, gives a prayer for the dead. The priest beseeches God for the rest of all the righteous from Abel to this day that they may repose in God's kingdom, "in the delight of Paradise, in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, our holy fathers, from whence pain and sorrow and sighing have fled away, where the light of [God's] countenance visits them and always shines on them."

Prayer for the dead is also found in other early Church manuscripts. The Church council of Gangra (358) in canon XX anathematizes anyone who thinks lightly of meetings (liturgical assemblies) to honor the holy martyrs. The Apostolic Constitutions (380), an early clergy manual on worship, doctrine, and disciplinary practices, gives a prayer that God "may forgive every sin, voluntary and involuntary" and would be "merciful and gracious" to the deceased.

Finally, there are many anecdotes from Orthodox saints who have visions of the departed. The deceased relate to the saint of having benefitted in the afterlife from prayers for them. A famous example is the account of St. Perpetua, who while in prison saw her deceased brother, Dinocrates, being tormented with heat and thirst. St. Perpetua prayed day and night for her brother that God would be merciful to him. She then received a second vision of her brother who was now in a cool and beautiful place where he could have plentiful access to water.

Therefore, in light of its widespread use, praying for the dead has always been a practice of the Orthodox Church. What of the other branches of Christianity? The Roman Catholic Church has never ceased offering prayers and masses for the dead. Interestingly, the Protestant reformers Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Calvin (1509-1564), and later John Wesley (1703-1791) never prohibited praying for the dead. The 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer included a prayer for the departed: "We commend into Thy mercy all other of Thy servants, which are departed hence from us with the sign of faith and now do rest in the sleep of peace: grant unto them, we beseech Thee, Thy mercy and everlasting peace." However, prayer for the dead gradually became denounced in Protestantism, particularly in present day Evangelical churches. They view the practice to not have enough Biblical support, and prayers for the dead are deemed to be too associated with the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory.

## The Golden Rule

There are practical reasons why we pray for the dead. First, the commemoration



offers some consolation to the grieving. Second, it benefits the faithful to be reminded of their own mortality, not in an intentionally morbid way, but rather that we would “strive to enter through the narrow gate” (Luke 13:24) and “be diligent to enter that rest” (Hebrews 4:11) promised to us if we are obedient to God. The memorial regularly confronts us with the fact that now is the time to work out our salvation “with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) so in the afterlife we may “be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (2 Peter 3:14). Third, each of us should pray for the dead to the measure we would want the living to pray for us after our passing (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). None of us exactly knows what awaits us in the intermediate state between our death and the final judgment. If the prayers of the living could in any way ease our time of waiting then such prayers are of tremendous value.



“God of spirits and of all humankind, as You trampled down death, overthrowing the evil one and granting life to Your world, will You, Lord, grant rest to Your servant now asleep in death, in a place of light, a place of renewed life, a joyous place, shunned alike by pain and sorrow and sighing” (From the Memorial Service of the Orthodox Church)