

Life after Death

One of the most common questions that I am asked is “What happens to you when you die?” Through out the millenniums there have been many theories, explanations and descriptions of life after death. As a Christian, in order to answer that question we need to look closely at the Bible. With Pascha coming quite early this year, April 8th, it is important to meditate on this subject since this great feast is preparing us for our own death in Christ, which leads to life. So let’s take a hard look at the reality that we all are going to die here on Earth and try to make sense of how this world is connected to the one to come.

Before we answer our first question we need to begin asking ourselves if there exists anything beyond the physical world. Very few people would say that our world is limited to what meets the eye. Just in our mission alone people have seen angels in our services, have been visited by bodiless powers in the hospital and been miraculously healed, and been guided by divine spirits out of near death circumstances. Granted one could say a person was breathing too much incense that day but who are we to judge. For a Christian these types of experiences are very common as seen in the writings of the Holy Scripture. (Mark 5:1-15, Eph. 6:12) A more surprising fact to most people is the amount of resources that have been placed on modern science to actually prove that other dimensions exist. In the discipline of physics the study of this is called “String Theory” and it puts forth the assumption that there must be many different dimensions in existence in order for the world to function the way it does. This might seem more like science fiction but this is what is being taught at the some of the best Universities in the world. I share this with you not to encourage hours of day dreaming but rather to encourage you to at least validate the fact which has been taught throughout the existence of humanity, there is much more going on than what we can see.

We still have the question “what happens to us when we leave this physical world?” Science to my knowledge has less on proving this subject. The largest evidence again is the discourses of people who have witnessed the appearance of ones who have passed away. Again just within our little community we have those who have been visited by their deceased loved ones in church, those who have been awakened by a friend who has recently passed away, and the numerous visitations within dreams of those who had previously died. In scripture we have much pointing to the existence of the humans after the physical death. In the book of Samuel it is clear that after the prophet Samuel’s death he does not just dive into non existence but rather Samuel does still exist at least as a spirit and is conjured up by a medium. (I Samuel 28:3-19) In the Old Testament this place where the dead dwell is referred to as Sheol (Gen. 37:35, Ps. 16:10). And in the New Testament this place is referred to as Hades which is basically the Greek word for Sheol. It is important to note that Hades is not Hell. Hell is the place where the wicked will be cast after the final judgment. One of the clearest descriptions of Hades is in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and how the rich man went to Hades with unquenchable thirst and Lazarus was carried to the bosom of Abraham and was comforted there. (Luke 16:19-31) So the question is where will we go?

In our belief system it is clear that we should never make any assumptions of ours or anyone else’s salvation or damnation. Christ said “Do not judge or you will be judged.” (Matt 7:1) With this in mind we do not know exactly where we will end up but

surely we have the sense of the different options. When Christ returns, as described in the book of Revelations, some will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven and others into the eternal fire. (Rev. 21:1-8) Some will have joy in Heaven and others will have punishment in Hell. But this all points to the day of judgment but what about all those who die before Christ's second coming? It is clear, as mentioned earlier, that in our belief the departed exist in what Christianity refers to as Hades or Sheol. Christ did (I Peter 4:6, 3:18-19) and will (Rev. 20:11-15) liberate those in Hades. Again using the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we see how our actions in this world will affect our journey in the next. In other words Hades is a place to avoid and the bosom of Abraham is much more favorable. The logical next question would be: "Is Hades the waiting line for Hell and is the bosom of Abraham the holding place for the good people who we call Saints? It is hard to answer that question with certainty but through the centuries the Church has definitely interpreted Luke 16:19-31 pointing to the consequences of wicked people and the results of living a loving and sacrificial life. But in reality there is no way to truly know only to try to piece the puzzle together. Within the Orthodox Church there has never been formal doctrine known as Purgatory, as there has been in the West, but there has definitely been a consistent similar teaching through the centuries in the East. On the one hand after death people who have lived sacrificial Christ like lives go to a place of joy encouraged by God's presence. On the other hand those people who lived a life opposite to Christ go to a place with continuous struggle to either be purified by fire and become more Christ like, as St. Paul stated (Cor. 3:15), or to begin eternity toward punishment. In its wisdom, the Orthodox Church has never formally proclaimed these teachings in its canonical doctrine, most likely because there are just too many unknowns that make any detailed attempt to explain life after death almost impossible. But a clear teaching is that our actions in this world have a direct effect on our state of being in the world to come. Therefore we need to act appropriately!

Therefore since Great Lent is starting on February 18th, let us walk toward God and not toward darkness. On that Sunday at vespers, begin with asking forgiveness from all of our brothers and sisters, and extending forgiveness to anyone who might have offended you, which our Lord compelled us to do. (Matt. 6:15). Say no to the great capitalistic marketing machine that tries to make us live a life of selfishness and over-indulgence, rather strengthen yourself through fasting from certain foods following the example of Christ. (Matt. 4:2) Also reach out to others in need heeding to the standard which we will be held to in the Last Judgment by caring for the least of God's brethren. (Matt. 25:31-46) And if we make mistakes and fall short, admit publicly to God your errors as was done in the time of the Apostles (Acts 19:18, James 5:16), now that audience is limited to presence of an ordained priest, and ask forgiveness receiving the grace of the Holy Spirit to try again. All of this should not be done out of fear of punishment, even though that could be a means to initially overcome certain vices, but ultimately we respond in a Christ like manner because we want to be like Him, just like a child wants to be like his or her parent, therefore we act appropriately. In this way we are lead to eternal life in this world and in the next. Amen.