

St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, Austin, TX

10th Anniversary Faith Study Series

(Part 2)

PRAYER FOR THE DEPARTED

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The question of our faith regarding the departed has to be approached from two sides. One: explaining the matter from our position. Two: defending our faith against criticism.

First, by way of explaining our position we may say that our faith though is very much Biblical, not so much based on individual references. We believe that Church is the body of Christ and any one who is baptized will be part of His body. As Christ lives eternally His body also should be living eternally. Jesus said "who ever eats of my body and drinks of my blood shall live eternally (John 6:54). Life eternal can not be challenged by physical changes. Because physical is not eternal, eternal is beyond physical. Death is only a physical change brought on humans. Living means living dynamically. Eternally living is to be eternally dynamic. In Christ being living and dynamic is to be being in participation. Participation of an organ of Christ's body is participation with Christ the head and with other organs or members. This participation also need not be physical. Therefore, the paramount form of participation is that in worship.

The Orthodox believes that there is a celestial eternal worship that goes on in heaven. All living and dead are participants in this worship. The

classical example for this is the event at the transfiguration mountain (Mtt. 17:1 ff.). Our worship in this world is a time and space bound participation in this celestial worship. The priest in our Eucharistic worship exhorts: "At this time our hearts, thoughts and minds be in at the high and exalted above where the Son of God is seated at the right hand side of the Father". A worshipping community is a dynamic loving and caring community. Love and care are not primarily physical and material phenomenon, rather they are spiritual and metaphysical. Our love and care can thus be better expressed in mutual prayer support. We remember each other in prayer. When we remember them our love towards them make us wish they be with Christ and be remembered all the time. All our prayers are placed before the merciful God. While we do so we present our wish also before Him.

We know that Christ can forgive our sins. So we also pray that just as our sins other's sins may be forgiven and be accepted in the company of all the celestial worshippers. In this intercessory prayer we not only include those who are living in this world but also those who have passed away from here and joined the unseen members of the body of Christ. We believe that the departed can also do the same on our behalf because they are also part of the dynamic and eternally living body of Christ. Thus we become truly loving and caring members of the same body of Christ transcending time, space and physical boundaries.

Secondly, we can consider our defense against criticism from other communities. Two things need to be said initially. First it is not easy to answer all question raised against our faith as they work with a difference approach to Bible and Church tradition. They also adopt different methodology to explain faith. Secondly, every thing we do in the name of remembering the departed and praying on their behalf may not be strictly on the basis of our faith rather will be related to cultural practices and for lack of proper understanding of our faith. It will be hard to defend many of such practices. In such cases we need to be humble enough to accept criticism.

One of the major objections raised against the remembrance of the departed is, -how can God forgive sins done while alive after they are not in the body in this world? Firstly our prayer for the departed is not primarily for the forgiveness of sins. We remember them since we know them and we love them and are concerned of them. It is for God to decide whether to forgive them or not. Again, this is a question we also struggle with and is expressed in one of our prayers too. But on the one hand we put our trust in God and hope that He is able to do that if He wishes so. On the other hand our love towards them makes us pray even if there is only little chance of being forgiven. Hoping and praying is not a bad thing to do.

A second question is based on the Psalmist's words in Ps. 115:17 where it is said "The dead do not praise the Lord or anyö. There is more than one response to this. Basically a Christian faith can not be challenged by a passage from Old Testament which does not contain themes of many of the Christian faith affirmations. If at all we take it as useful, we have to take the whole Psalm and continue to read verse 18 where it is said, "But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and for ever moreö. Here "ever more" can be taken as a time beyond physical world. Further there is an instance where God asked prophet Ezekiel to talk and prophecy to the bones in the valley of death (Eze. Ch. 47). God through the prophet promises the bones that they will be brought back to life. Question is how can the bones hear what the prophet was saying if the dead can not hear the words of a living person? Again Christ called Lazarus out of the tomb and called him to life (John 11:43). If Lazarus can not praise God in death how can he hear the calling of Christ?

The third question usually raised is, "can the dead be benefited by our prayers? The first answer would be that we Christians do not do things to get some thing back or for a reward. That is a utilitarian materialistic attitude which is contrary to Christian way of life. We do things because of our love and care. It is for God to decide the benefit. More over we do things because we have already received some thing great from our Lord which is Salvation and right to call God "our Father" Motivated by the love we received from our Lord, we try to express our love to others and remember them in our prayers without minding whether they are living

or dead. We are not concerned of the benefit which is for God to decide. We also believe that benefit from God is not out of what we do. It is God's gift to us.

A forth question asked is, "do we have evidence in the Bible to support what we do in this matter? To an orthodox what we do in Christian worship and in life is not solely based on what we see in the Bible. We are guided by the basic principles we see in the Bible and also in the teaching of the fathers of the Church who witnessed Christ and His salvific work. Of course the second has to agree with the basic principles of the teachings of Christ. We do not think that loving the departed and remembering them and praying for their welfare is against Christ's principle. There is no passage in the Bible which would suggest that remembering the departed is meaningless. If we take the passages in the Bible strictly and literally even burying the dead would be against Christ's teaching as Christ once said, "Let the dead bury the dead" (Matt. 8:22). Burying the dead is considered by every one as a humanitarian thing. Our love and concern for the welfare of our dear ones go beyond the physical world and that is not contrary to the teaching of Christ. As said earlier, we have evidence that Christ Himself remembered departed one when He was conducting a worshipping atmosphere at the transfiguration mountain. He invited not only Peter, James and John to that worship, rather also Moses who died some thirteen centuries before Christ and Elijah who died some eight centuries back. It is also noteworthy that these two were more active in worship than the living ones. At least Peter was concerned of the troubles and hard times waited on the bottom of the hill and was planning to build three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. He found life up on the hill better than life in the valley. If Jesus can invite dead members of the Old Testament community to worship, how much more He can do it with the New Testament worshipping community? We only recognize that probability in remembering them in our worship. There is where we stand regarding our attitude to the departed.