Death and the Life of Heaven



Through baptism, a person is regenerated: ‘born anew’ – and becomes a member of the Body of Christ – the Christian Church.

Saint Paul speaks of baptism as death and resurrection:

*‘Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’*. Romans 6:4

Entering the baptismal water as into a tomb, we *‘die’* to the old, fallen and unregenerate nature which we inherit from Adam, the first man, and are resurrected with Christ as we emerge into the new life of the Kingdom of God.

For a Christian therefore, death consists of this dying to our old nature – whereas the physical death of the body is mere sleep. That is why, during Orthodox Church services for the dead, there is the oft-repeated refrain: *‘Give rest, O lord, to the soul of Thy servant/handmaiden who has* ***fallen asleep****’.*

The life of the Kingdom into which we enter through baptism begins here on earth, but is experienced in its fullness in heaven in the presence of God, the Holy Trinity. This means that for a Christian, death is not final or absolute, but rather, a transition from one life – the earthly life – to another life. It is no coincidence that in the calendars of the Christian Church, Saints are commemorated on the day of their death which is for them their ‘birthday’, so to speak, in heaven.

# Death and Prayer

In the face of death, we naturally feel helpless, but we are not helpless; Christ has defeated death and *‘has become the firstborn of those who have fallen asleep’* (1 Corinthians 15:20)*,* and at Easter throughout the world, Orthodox Christians greet each other with the Resurrection greeting*- ‘Christ is risen; He is risen indeed!’*

The tradition of the Church teaches us that we can help the dead by praying to God for their rest in *‘a place of light, a place of refreshment, a place of repose where there is no sickness, or sorrow, or sighing but life everlasting’.* This is why we hold lighted candles throughout services for the dead.

The fact that earthly death is merely death of the body means that the communion which exists between members of the Body of Christ – the Church – is not broken when our earthly body dies. It also means that we pray for the dead just as we pray for those still on earth. Death does not destroy the communion of prayer. Orthodox Christians, therefore, consider it their sacred duty to take great care to pray regularly for the souls of the departed.

*‘For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead[[1]](#footnote-1), so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does. 1 Peter 4:6 (New Revised Standard Version)*

**Easter Hymn**

*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and on those in the tombs bestowing life.* *(Easter Hymn)*

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The Orthodox Church Funeral Service

## Prayers and Biblical Texts

The main content in the Orthodox funeral service is prayer for the soul of the person who has fallen asleep in the Lord.

These prayers surround the many Biblical texts which are chanted in the service – *‘Blessed are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the Lord’* (Psalm 118[[2]](#footnote-2) *[119]* and also Psalms 90 *[91]* and 50 *[51],* the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10) and a reading from the Gospel of Jesus Christ (John 5:24-30) and from one of St. Paul’s Epistles (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

It is appropriate that Christians pray that the departed will be remembered always – not only on earth, but by God Himself for eternity, and this is expressed in the words *‘Eternal memory’*!

## The Mortality of the Body

At times of bereavement, Christians also meditate on the mortality of the body, and accordingly, another component of the Orthodox funeral service is found in the verses that meditate on the mortality of the body.

The body of a Christian is a consecrated vessel through the sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation (confirmation) and is therefore treated with great respect during life and after death.

In Genesis (1:26) God says: *‘Let* ***us*** *make man in* ***our*** *image after* ***our*** *likeness’.* Each person is therefore an image - an icon - of God the Holy Trinity, and the body is part of this tripartite Trinitarian image.

Through Baptism and Chrismation, the body is a location of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and so is treated with great care after death, and returned to the earth after we say ‘farewell’.

## The Last ‘Farwell’ [[3]](#footnote-3)

The body will be resurrected on the last day and - as St Paul says - in a form suitable for the life of heaven. Towards the end of the funeral service there is an opportunity for those who choose to come and say an earthly *‘farewell’* so to speak, to the person who has fallen asleep.

The last prayers of the funeral service are that the departed servant of God will be remembered for eternity by God Himself.

Then, after the chanting of *‘Eternal memory’,* the priest recites the prayer of absolution, the text of which is then placed in the coffin with the person who has fallen asleep.

**Prayer for one who has fallen asleep**

O God of spirits and of all flesh, who hast trampled down death and overthrown the devil, and given life to Thy world; do Thou, O Lord, give rest to the soul of Thy servant, *Name*, who hath fallen asleep, in a place of light, a place of refreshment, a place of repose, whence pain, sorrow and sighing have fled away. Pardon, O God, as Thou art good and lovest mankind, every sin committed by him/her in word or deed or thought, because there is no one who lives and does not sin, for Thou alone art without sin; Thy righteousness is everlasting righteousness, and Thy word is truth.

For Thou art the Resurrection, and the Life, and the Repose of Thy servant/handmaiden, *Name*, who hath fallen asleep, O Christ our God, and to Thee do we send up glory and to Thy Father, Who is without beginning, and to Thine All‑holy, and Good, and Life‑creating Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

**Hymns for one who has fallen asleep**

*Kondak*

With the Saints, give rest, O Christ, to the soul of your servant/handmaiden where there is no pain nor sickness nor sighing but life everlasting.

*Ikos*

You only are immortal who created and fashioned man, for out of the earth were we mortals made; and unto the earth shall we return again as you commanded when you made me saying *‘Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return’*; whither we mortals also wend our way, making our funeral dirge this song Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia

# Eternal be the memory of *Name*

# the departed servant / handmaiden of God.

1. . i.e. those *‘…to whom Christ went to preach after His death on the Cross’.* (Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria – for nine hundred years, one of the most beloved and widely-read Scriptural commentators.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Enumeration according to the Septuagint (‘The LXX’ / ‘The Translation of the Seventy’) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Not during the Corona Pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)