

**Friends, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep,
or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.
We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so
we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.**

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14

Why must we die? How are we to endure the grief caused by the passing of a loved one? Where are we to turn for comfort, for help, for deliverance and salvation?

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.
1 Corinthians 15:19-22

Orthodox Christians believe that death is the tragic condition resulting from the original sin and “fall” from the perfection of life created for mankind in the beginning. The human beings – in the form of Adam and Eve – created in the image and likeness of God entered into a state of alienation from their creator and His will. The Book of Genesis reveals that God gave Adam free will – the power to choose between good and evil – and it therefore rested with Adam either to accept the vocation set before him or to refuse it. He refused it. Instead of continuing along the path marked out for him by God, he turned aside and disobeyed God. Adam’s fall consisted essentially in his disobedience of the will of God; he set up his own will against the divine will, and so by his own act he separated himself from God. As a result, a new form of existence appeared on earth – that of disease and death. By turning away from God, who is immortality and life, humans put themselves in a state that was contrary to nature, and this unnatural condition led to an inevitable disintegration of their being and eventually to physical death. The consequences of Adam’s disobedience extended to all his descendents. Today we recognize this condition in the temptations, transgressions and sins that characterize our lives, no matter how hard we strive for purity, perfection and holiness. We are members one of another, as St. Paul never ceased to insist, and if one member suffers the whole body suffers. In virtue of this mysterious unity of the human race, not only Adam but all humankind became subject to mortality. Nor was the disintegration that followed from the fall merely physical. Cut off from God, Adam and his descendents passed under the dominion of sin and of the devil. Each new human being is born into a world where sin prevails everywhere, a world in which it is easy to do evil and hard to do good. Our will is weakened and enfeebled by what the Greeks call “desire” and the Latins “concupiscence.” We are all subject to these, the spiritual effects of original sin.

The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers that hold humankind in bondage: sin, death, and the evil one. This work of ending the rule of death, sin, and evil has been accomplished by Christ on a cosmic level. His nativity of the Virgin Mary, His earthly ministry, His voluntary passion, crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven are the fulfillment of the law of Moses and of the prophecies of the prophets who spoke of the deliverance of humanity from bondage. The act of salvation in Christ is at the heart of all Orthodox Christian worship. It is cosmic inasmuch as it changes – “transforms” or “transfigures” – everything! The personal acceptance of salvation continues in the Church as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, to which each person must consent and with which each person must willingly cooperate. This is the Orthodox doctrine of “synergy” that gives to us a solution to the dilemma of physical death.

The power of death, sin, and evil is broken. But it is not expelled from human life as if by magic. We still have free will, and we are not forced into goodness. The power of death as the ultimate determinant is shattered, but it's *influencing* power remains. We are still tempted. The flesh still "leans toward evil," the spirit still revels in its pride and selfishness.

We gather as the faithful people of God, bearing our sorrow and yet our hope, in offering prayers and supplications for the departed. In the proclamation we sing at Pascha (Easter), "*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life,*" we commend our loved one who has fallen asleep – along with one another – to the merciful loving-kindness of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. In God and His Church there is no division between the living and the departed, but all are one in the love of the Father. Whether we are alive in the flesh or whether we are dead in the flesh, as members of the Church we still belong to the same family. We still have a duty to bear one another's burdens. Therefore, just as Orthodox Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask for one another's prayers, so they pray also for the faithful departed and ask the faithful departed to pray for them. Death cannot sever the bond of mutual love that links the members of the Church together. Orthodox are convinced that Christians here on earth have a duty to pray for the departed, and they are confident that the dead are helped by such prayers. Saint Simeon the New Theologian describes the saints as forming a golden chain: "*The Holy Trinity, pervading everyone from first to last, from head to foot, binds them all together. The saints in each generation, joined to those who have gone before, and filled like them with the light, become a golden chain, in which each saint is a separate link, united to the next by faith, works, and love. So in the One God they form a single chain which cannot be broken.*" Such is the Orthodox notion of the communion of saints. This chain is a chain of mutual love and prayer; and in this loving prayer the members of the Church on earth who are "called to be saints" have their place.

In private any Orthodox Christian is free to ask for the prayers of any member of the Church, whether recognized (canonized) as a "saint" or not. It would be perfectly normal for an Orthodox child, if orphaned, to end his evening prayers by asking for the intercessions not only of the Mother of God and the saints, but of his own mother and father. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that the affection we have for a loved one cannot be destroyed by death; but rather, it is the evidence of the victory over death in Christ – the Giver of Life, the Resurrection, and our Savior. In a funeral sermon he said: "*Continue in your affection now just as you formerly did. For such is the power of love. It embraces, and unites, and fastens together not only those who are present, and near, and visible but also those who are far distant; and neither length of time, nor separation in space, nor anything else of that kind can break up and sunder in pieces the affection of the soul.*"

Saint Ambrose of Milan said: "*What grief is there that the grace of the Resurrection of Christ does not console? What sorrow is not overcome by the belief that nothing perishes in death?*" Let us, therefore, grieve the loss of a loved one, but know, with blessed assurance, that in Christ we have the inheritance of eternal life; in a place of brightness, refreshment, and repose, where all the righteous dwell. As we offer prayers for our loved one, let us commit ourselves, and one another, to our Lord and Savior. To Him be glory, honor, and worship unto all ages. Amen.

May God grant the memory of his departed servant to be eternal!