

Christology and the Grace of God

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Christology is the heart of Christian confession, and in the Coptic Orthodox tradition no name guards that heart more faithfully than St. Cyril of Alexandria, who taught the Church to confess 'the One Nature of the Incarnate Logos.' This lesson examines what that phrase does — and does not — mean, distinguishing the Orthodox hypostatic union from every mixture, fusion, or division of persons. From this foundation we turn to grace: the undeserved favor of God that flows from the Incarnation and reaches into every corner of the Christian life. We consider how the Fathers defined grace, how the Pelagian error denied our need for it, how grace is prefigured in the Old Covenant and fulfilled in Christ, how it works within us to will and to do, and how the sacraments of the Church become the very vessels through which grace is administered. We also consider the gifts of grace — prayer, faith, the indwelling Spirit, seasoned speech, the mind of Christ, strength over the passions, authority over evil — and, soberly, the possibility that grace may be withdrawn from those who persistently refuse to cooperate with it. Christology and grace are not two doctrines but one: the Word became flesh so that what belongs to Him by nature might become ours by grace.

The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos

St. Cyril of Alexandria's profound declaration — 'The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos' — is the cornerstone of our Christological confession. The phrase has been repeated through the centuries, but it has also been misread, both by those who oppose it and by those who have not been properly taught its meaning. Because so much hangs on reading St. Cyril rightly, the Church has always insisted that the phrase be received with the utmost precision.

By 'One Nature,' St. Cyril does not mean that the divine and human natures are mixed into a new, third nature. Each nature retains its distinct properties and essence: the divine remains eternal, uncreated, and possessing all the attributes of God; the human remains finite, created, and possessing all the attributes of humanity, except for sin. The union does not produce a hybrid. It does not turn divinity into humanity, nor humanity into divinity. It does not result in a *tertium quid* — some third thing neither God nor man.

Neither does 'One Nature' mean a union of two persons. The Incarnation did not bring together two subjects side by side, as if Christ were a divine person keeping company with a human person. There is one subject in Christ — one Person, one Hypostasis. The term 'hypostasis' is central here. It refers to the concrete, individual existence of a being. In Christ there is one Hypostasis, one Person, who fully possesses both natures. This is the mystery the Church calls the Hypostatic Union.

St. Cyril himself guarded this with the analogy of iron in fire: there is no mixing or mingling of the natures themselves, as though they ceased to be what they are, but there is a communion of properties. The iron retains its nature; the fire retains its nature. Yet when the iron is set in the fire, the iron truly burns and the fire is truly borne by the iron. So it is with Christ: the humanity truly bears the actions of God, and the divinity is truly present in every human act, yet without confusion of natures.

The Actions and Sayings of Christ

One of the most important practical consequences of the hypostatic union concerns how we read the Gospels. Every action and every saying of Christ must be attributed to the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ — not to one nature in isolation. The Orthodox Church refuses to dissect Christ into moments that belong only to the divine or only to the human.

His miracles are not merely displays of divine power with no human reference; they are the acts of the one Person, Jesus Christ, who is both fully God and fully Man. His teachings are not merely the wisdom of a human sage; they are the words of the one Person, the divine Logos, the Word of God who has taken flesh. His suffering and death are not merely human experiences to be pitied; they are the redemptive acts of the one Person who is at once God and Man, and who offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This unity of attribution has far-reaching consequences for our salvation. When we confess that God suffered in the flesh, we do not mean that the divine nature was altered in its eternal being; we mean that the one Person who bore our flesh truly bore our suffering, and therefore our suffering has been taken up into the life of God. When we say that Christ died for us, we confess not that a human being died while a divine being looked on, but that the one Person who is the Word made flesh entered into death itself and trampled it.

The blessing of this mystery reaches to us. The Incarnation opens to humanity the possibility of being united to God and restoring the image and likeness through grace. This is what St. Peter means when he writes:

“By which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” 2 Peter 1:4, NKJV

Why Christology Matters

St. Cyril of Alexandria treats the importance of Christology at great length in his Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. Why does it matter? Because it answers the question of what went wrong with humanity and how God has answered.

“But when he was led astray by the deception of the devil, he despised the creator. He trampled on the law that was marked out for him and grieved his benefactor. The benefactor took back the grace that was given to him. When, for the first time, the one who came to life heard, ‘Earth you are, and to earth you will return,’ the likeness to God

was then marked with a false stamp through the sin that rushed in, and the engraving was no longer distinct. It became more obscure in him, so to speak, and darkened by the transgression. When the human race reached a great multitude and sin ruled over all of them, it thoroughly plundered the soul of each one, and nature was stripped of the original grace. The Spirit also departed completely, and the rational creature fell into utter irrationality, not even recognizing the creator himself.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Vol. 1, pp. 81-82

This is the condition St. Cyril describes: the likeness of God stamped with a false image, nature stripped of its original grace, the Spirit departed, and rational creatures fallen into irrationality so deep they no longer recognize the Creator. Into this ruin the Incarnation enters — not as a philosophical adjustment but as a restoration of nature at its very source.

“Justly marvel at the incomparable mercy of the divine nature toward us, which graces those whom he has made with what belongs to him and shares with his creatures what belongs to himself alone.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Vol. 2, p. 307

The Incarnation is therefore the pivotal act of divine restoration. Through Christ the divine image within humanity is renewed, not merely returned to an original state but elevated to a higher communion with God. The theme that runs through the whole of St. Cyril's teaching is that through the redemptive work of Christ, we are granted the opportunity to participate in the divine nature. This is the ultimate goal of human existence. Christology is therefore never a mere academic discipline. It is the dynamic truth that shapes our understanding of God, humanity, and the purpose of our being.

What Is Grace?

Grace is best defined, in the Fathers' usage, as everything that God bestows upon a human being. It is the undeserved, unearned favor of God — His boundless love poured out upon creatures who could never claim it as their right. Every blessing we receive, whether spiritual or material, has its source in the grace of God. We do not summon it by our merit; we receive it as gift.

Precisely because grace is central to salvation, the Church has always guarded it against two opposite errors. The first extreme is the claim that grace alone saves, such that human cooperation plays no part. This is the error of grace without response, and it opens the door to lawless living: if nothing we do matters, then any manner of life is permitted. The Orthodox Church refuses this. The second extreme is the claim that grace is not truly necessary, such that the human will can reach salvation by its own effort. This is the error of effort without grace, and it falsely exalts man to the place of his own savior. The Orthodox Church refuses this as well.

Between these extremes stands the confession of the Church: salvation is by grace, received through faith, and lived out in works that are themselves the fruit of grace at work within us. Grace is never a license to neglect the life of the Gospel, and effort is never an achievement that can dispense with

grace. Both operate together in what the Fathers call synergy — a cooperation of divine initiative and human response.

The Pelagian Error

Pelagius was a British monk and theologian who lived from about 355 to 425 A.D. He was well versed in Greek and Latin and known for his rigorous ascetic life. His teaching, however, fell into a serious error that the Church was compelled to condemn. The heresy that bears his name is founded on the denial of original sin and the claim that salvation can be achieved through human effort without the work of divine grace.

Pelagius argued that Adam's sin affected only Adam himself, transmitting no inherited condition to his descendants. He held that human beings are born with a clean slate, possessing the full freedom and natural ability to choose good over evil without any interior assistance from God. In his view, man could save himself; grace was reduced to an external aid — perhaps the teaching of Christ or the example of the saints — rather than the inward power of God transforming the soul.

This position stood in direct opposition to the teaching of the Church. The Fathers, preeminently St. Augustine in the West and the Greek Fathers in the East, taught that Adam's sin corrupted the human condition, leaving all of humanity in need of an interior healing that can come only from God. Salvation, in their teaching, is impossible without the grace of God freely given through Jesus Christ. Human effort without grace cannot cross the distance between fallen man and holy God.

The Pelagian heresy was condemned at the Council of Carthage in 418 A.D., where St. Augustine played a decisive role, and again at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. — the same council that upheld St. Cyril's Christology against Nestorius. The condemnation of Pelagianism protects us from a subtle but devastating error: the notion that we can be good without God. No amount of moral effort, however sincere, can substitute for the healing action of grace within the soul. Yet this condemnation does not swing to the opposite error. It does not make man a passive object. Grace operates within freedom, and freedom without grace can only imitate what grace alone can accomplish.

Grace in the Orthodox View

In the Orthodox Church, salvation is not reduced to a legal transaction nor a forensic declaration. It is a dynamic and ongoing process of healing, renewal, and **participation in the divine life**. It begins in baptism, grows through the sacramental life of the Church, and is consummated in the mercy of God at the Last Judgment. By His mercy we are justified by faith and empowered by Him for good works. We are saved at the Last Day not because we have perfectly kept the Law, but because the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone lived in complete righteousness and alone was resurrected to eternal life, is the way to the Father.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23, NKJV

This verse tells us that even if we should keep the Law in its fullest sense, we would still fall short of the glory of God, for we would still die and still need salvation. The Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled the Law in our place:

“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’” John 14:6, NKJV

The Orthodox Church does not despise the Law but receives it as a preparation for the coming of Christ. The Law reveals our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. As St. Paul writes, 'Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Romans 3:20, NKJV). In His perfect obedience and sacrifice on the Cross, Christ fulfilled the Law and established a New Covenant based on grace and love. St. Paul therefore writes, 'I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain' (Galatians 2:21, NKJV).

The sacraments of the Church are the channels of this divine grace. Through Baptism we enter the Body of Christ and begin the journey of salvation. Through the Eucharist we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, entering into communion with Him and with one another. Through Chrismation we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. Through Confession we are restored when we fall. Through Holy Matrimony and Holy Orders we are set apart for specific vocations of service. In each, grace is not merely symbolized; it is conveyed.

Grace Prefigured in the Old Testament

Of all the creations of God, only humanity was made in His image and likeness, for He formed us with His own hands. No other creature was formed directly by the hands of God. After the creation, Scripture tells us, 'God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good' (Genesis 1:31). The Hebrew word rendered 'good' here — *tov* — carries the richer sense of 'beautiful, bountiful, cheerful, fine, good, gracious.' Humanity was made in a state of grace, a state of beauty and bounty, in harmony with its Creator.

After the fall, man was corrupted and lost this original state of grace. Yet even in the Old Covenant, grace did not disappear; it appeared in anticipations and foreshadowings. Figures such as Abraham, Lot, and Moses found grace in the eyes of the Lord, though the fullness of grace had not yet come. Scripture says of Noah:

“But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord... Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.” Genesis 6:8-9, NKJV

And again of Noah's obedience: 'And Noah did according to all that the Lord commanded him' (Genesis 7:5, NKJV). The grace given to Noah was not earned; it was freely bestowed. Yet Noah's righteousness and obedience were the true response to that grace. This is the pattern the Old Testament reveals again and again — a pattern in which God freely gives, and the servant of God responds in faith and obedience, though the full remedy for sin has not yet come.

“And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.” John 1:16, NKJV

This phrase 'grace for grace' points to the continuous outpouring of divine favor. It builds upon the foundation of God's grace in the Old Testament and culminates in the abundant grace offered through the sacrifice of Christ. The Mosaic Law served its purpose in revealing God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness, but it could not accomplish what only the Cross of Christ could accomplish. The Law pointed forward; the Gospel fulfills.

The Work of Grace in Our Lives

The cause of all good in us, and of every spiritual growth we experience, is that God works in us to do His will. St. Paul puts this with great clarity:

“For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”
Philippians 2:13, NKJV

Our spiritual aspirations and our actions are not merely products of our own initiative. They are divinely inspired and enabled. Grace operates within us, shaping our desires and strengthening our wills so that our choices may conform to His perfect plan. St. Augustine expresses the same truth in his treatise *On the Grace of Christ*:

“It is not that the will or the deed is not ours, but without His aid we neither will nor do anything good.” St. Augustine — *On the Grace of Christ*, 26

This sentence holds together the full Orthodox teaching. The will is truly ours. The deed is truly ours. But without the aid of grace, neither the will nor the deed achieves any good. Grace does not erase our agency; it empowers it. The synergy between human cooperation and divine enablement is not competition — it is communion.

The gifts of grace appear in rich diversity, and yet they are united in one source. In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, St. Paul lists a variety of spiritual gifts: the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. These gifts differ in expression but share one source:

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, NKJV

Each gift is distributed according to the sovereign will of the Spirit, but each is given for the profit of all. Grace is never a private possession; it is a ministry. The one who receives a gift receives it as a trust for the Body of Christ.

The Gifts of Grace

The gifts of grace are many. Among them are prayer and faith, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, seasoned speech, the mind of Christ, the strength to overcome the conditions of our fallen nature, authority over evil, endurance in tribulation, and the ultimate gift of salvation itself.

Concerning the indwelling of the Spirit, St. Cyril of Alexandria writes:

“Christ did not receive the Spirit for Himself but rather for us in Himself. For all good things come to us through Him. Our forefather Adam did not preserve the grace of the Spirit, since he was turned by deception to disobedience and sin. And so in him our entire nature ultimately lost the God-given good. Therefore, God the Word, who knows no turning, had to become human so that by receiving the Spirit as a human He might preserve the good permanently in our nature.” St. Cyril of Alexandria — Commentary on the Gospel of St. John

Concerning seasoned speech, St. Paul writes, 'Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one' (Colossians 4:6, NKJV). Concerning the mind of Christ, he writes, 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ' (1 Corinthians 2:16, NKJV).

Grace also gives us strength over the passions that belong to fallen human nature. Concerning grief and sorrow, St. Cyril teaches on John 11:33 that Christ 'was troubled by the Spirit' — that is, by the power of the Holy Spirit He rebuked His own flesh so that it might not indulge grief without restraint. 'The flesh,' St. Cyril writes, 'is being rebuked by the Spirit and taught to have feelings beyond its own nature... so that by the energies of His Spirit He might strengthen the weaknesses of the flesh.' So too concerning fear, St. Cyril teaches on John 12:27 that in Christ fear was stirred up but immediately subdued by the divine power, so that our nature might be transformed into 'incomparable boldness.' So too concerning gluttony: 'By eating we were conquered in Adam; by abstinence we conquered in Christ.' Christ fasted forty days and forty nights (Matthew 4:2), and the Tuesday Psalm of Midnight Praises sings, 'Your holy name, O my Lord Jesus, saved them from all their afflictions. For them it was a living food, which filled their souls, and their bodies too.'

St. Cyril summarizes the pattern with striking precision: 'Just as death was destroyed in no other way than the Savior dying, so it is with each of the passions of the flesh. If He had not been afraid, our nature would not have been freed from fear. If He had not grieved, there could never have been any deliverance from grief. If He had not been troubled and alarmed, there would have been no escape from these conditions. For every human experience, you will find the same corresponding experience in Christ.'

Grace also gives us authority over evil. In the Life of Antony, St. Athanasius records the boasting of a demon who finally admits, 'I tricked many, and I vanquished many, but just now, waging my attack on you and your labors, as I have upon many others, I was too weak.' St. Anthony answers boldly, 'You, then, are much to be despised, for you are black of mind, and like a powerless child. From now on you cause me no anxiety, for the Lord is my helper.' At these words, St. Athanasius writes, the demon immediately fled. The Lord has promised us strength from on high:

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” John 16:33, NKJV

The Removal of Grace

Is it possible that divine grace may abandon a person? The answer of the Church is soberly yes. Grace may abandon a person either temporarily, in order to lead him to repentance, or permanently, if the person insists on refusing to interact with it. In biblical language this complete removal is spoken of in the phrase 'a debased mind':

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.” Romans 1:28, NKJV

Temporary withdrawal, on the other hand, is a fatherly discipline. It may come for the person's own benefit, that he might recognize his dependence and return. In Isaiah the Lord addresses the soul:

“For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you.” Isaiah 54:7, NKJV

The temporary withdrawal of grace is not divine indifference but divine pedagogy — a strategy to awaken the slumbering conscience, rekindle the flame of faith, and guide the erring soul back to the path of righteousness. It is the loving Father letting go of the child's hand for a moment so that the child learns what it means to reach back.

Complete abandonment, however, is the consequence of persistent and deliberate rejection. God, in His respect for human freedom, allows persons to choose their own path, even when that path leads away from Him. This is not an arbitrary act of divine wrath but the natural consequence of a soul that has set itself against the very source of its life. We are given this warning not to terrify us but to make us vigilant. The same Father who calls the prodigal home is the Father who will not force the son to stay.

The Grace of the Gospel

The New Testament offers a rich multitude of verses that unfold the wonder of grace. Three passages, taken together, hold the balance the Church has always kept.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Ephesians 2:8-10, NKJV

St. Paul's words here hold two truths together. Salvation is attained 'by grace through faith' — it is not earned, not merited, not achieved by human accomplishment. And yet salvation is 'for good works' —

believers are created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand. Grace does not cancel works; it creates them. Works do not cause salvation; they flow from it.

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” Romans 3:28, NKJV

Justification does not come through the Mosaic Law. It is faith in Jesus Christ that brings about our right standing before God. And yet this is no faith that leaves works behind. St. James speaks to a misunderstanding that was already threatening the apostolic community:

“Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” James 2:17, NKJV

There is no contradiction between St. Paul and St. James. St. Paul refuses a faith that is merely the keeping of external laws; St. James refuses a faith that is merely intellectual assent. The one true faith is neither — it is a faith that is alive, that moves, that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, and forgives the enemy.

St. Jerome, contemplating the difference between the old and the new, writes in Letter 75:

'For in place of the grace of the law, which has passed away, we have received the abiding grace of the gospel, and, instead of the shadows and figures of the ancient covenant, truth has come by Jesus Christ.'

The grace of the Gospel is not a new quantity of the same grace that was given to Moses; it is the fulfillment of every shadow, the realization of every figure, the truth to which the whole Old Covenant pointed. This grace is not temporary but abiding. It rests upon the Church as the very breath of her life, and it calls each one of us to respond with faith, sacrament, and a life of love.



Review Questions

1. What does One Nature mean in the saying “The One Nature of the Incarnate Logos”? (A: One Nature = One hypostasis = One Person out of two natures)
2. There was mixing/mingling of the natures in Christ. (A: False)
3. All actions and sayings in the Gospels are attributed to the one Person of Jesus Christ only and not to individual natures. (A: True)
4. What is the relation between Grace, Faith, and Works? (A: By grace we are saved through faith which is directed from God and not our own works. One cannot happen without the other)
5. Out of all the creatures of God only mankind was made in the image and likeness of God. (A: True)
6. Explain the Pelagian heresy and what is its main teaching. (A: The Pelagian heresy was founded on the idea that denies the original sin of humans and instead believes in the work of grace in salvation of man)
7. What does St. Peter mean when he says that we become “partakers of the divine nature”? (A: His incarnation blesses us with the ability of being united with Him and restoring our image and likeness through grace.)
8. What are the two extremes individuals tend to believe grace encompasses? (A: The idea that grace alone saves individuals from eternal death. The other extreme is that grace is not needed for salvation)
9. Is it possible for grace to be removed? When would this be the case? (A: Yes. This occurs when an individual insists on refusing to interact with it. This can also occur for the purpose of leading one to repentance)
10. When did we start receiving God's grace? (A: God's grace was not given to us by the person's works but was given to us like the bible says, God's grace in your life began "before the foundation of the world".)

Salvation in the Orthodox Perspective

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

A Divine Initiative, Not a Human Aspiration

Salvation, in Orthodox theology, is not man reaching for God; it is God bending down in love toward man. You don't climb a ladder to heaven by merit or effort — the ladder descended to you, in the Person of Jesus Christ. Scripture insists on this order before it says anything else:

“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” Hebrews 2:3, NKJV

Salvation is called great because it isn't a human aspiration that God has accepted, but a divine initiative that God has brought to you. You do not ascend; He descends. You do not reach up; He bends down. St. Irenaeus put the whole logic of the Incarnation in a single line: the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, “did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” The story of salvation isn't primarily about escaping punishment, though it does deliver you from judgment — it's about union with God, the healing and elevation of your nature into communion with Him.

The blood of Christ, in which this salvation is sealed, is not a legal transaction. It is life poured out. Salvation didn't come through law, philosophy, or force, but through the precious blood of the Son of God. Scripture is emphatic:

“Without shedding of blood there is no remission.” Hebrews 9:22, NKJV

As Orthodox Christians you don't read the Cross as a moment in which the Father punishes the Son in your place. The Cross is the moment in which the Son offers Himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit, and the love of the Holy Trinity is revealed in its fullness. The blood of Christ is the currency of divine love, not the price of wrath appeased. The whole of Orthodox soteriology is built on this foundation.

The Blood of Christ and Salvation

Blood as the Seal of the New Covenant

Salvation is only available through the blood of Christ. “Without shedding of blood, there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22). The Passover lamb was a symbol of our Lord: “For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Through the blood of the lamb, the Israelites were saved from death: “Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13). And through this precious Blood, sins are remitted and you enter a new

covenant with God: “This is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28).

Typology: The Old Testament as a Map to Golgotha

Typology here is not metaphor — it is prophecy through shadow. Every sacrifice in the Old Testament, every ritual washing, every drop of blood that fell from the altar of the Tabernacle was a whisper of the Incarnate Logos. The Orthodox Church reads the Old Testament not as discarded history but as a map pointing toward Golgotha ... from:

- Adam's covering with garments of skin (Genesis 3:21), a type of the Lamb slain to cover our nakedness, to
- the ram in Isaac's place (Genesis 22:13), a substitute, yes, but also a revelation that “God will provide for Himself the Lamb,” to
- the blood on the doorposts (Exodus 12:13), a seal against death fulfilled in the blood on the wood of the Cross

These events foreshadowed a greater offering, the sinless, spotless sacrifice of Christ. Through this blood the New Covenant was established. You are no longer bound to the letter of the Law but to life in the Spirit: purchased, washed, and redeemed.

Blood in the Life of the Church

The blood of Christ is not confined to Calvary. It flows through the Mysteries, and preeminently through the Eucharist. When the priest elevates the chalice and proclaims that what is given is for the remission of sins and eternal life to those who partake of it, this is no empty ritual. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught the newly baptized to trust exactly this: “Consider therefore the Bread and the Wine not as bare elements, for they are, according to the Lord's declaration, the Body and Blood of Christ.” This is why the Orthodox faithful approach the chalice with fear and love — not a servile fear, but the holy awe of those who know they are receiving not merely grace but the very Person of Christ. The Scriptures, read with the mind of the Church, bear continual witness to the centrality of this Blood:

Scripture	Verse
Acts 20:28	“Shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ”
Romans 5:9	“Having now been justified by His blood , we shall be saved from wrath through Him.”
Ephesians 1:7 / Col. 1:14	“In Him we have redemption through His blood. ”
Ephesians 2:13	“In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. ”
Colossians 1:20	“Having made peace through the blood of His cross.”
Hebrews 9:12	“Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the most Holy place once for all , having obtained eternal redemption.” - Hebrews 9:12

Hebrews 9:14	“...How much more shall the blood of Christ , who through the eternal spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”
Hebrews 10:19	“Therefore brethren having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus. ”
Hebrews 10:29	“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will be thought worthy who has trampled the son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”
Hebrews 12:24	“...To Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel ”
Hebrews 13:20–21	“Now may the God of peace ... through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will.”
1 Peter 1:18–19	“You were not redeemed with corruptible things ...but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”
1 John 5:8	“There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood ; and these three agree as one.”
1 John 1:7	“... The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”
Revelation 1:5	“... To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood ... ”
Revelation 5:9	“... You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood ... ”
Revelation 7:14	“These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. ”
Revelation 12:11	“And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb ... ”

Each passage lifts the veil and reveals the mystery hidden for ages and generations: Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ alive in His Church. When the Holy Scriptures are read prayerfully and with the mind of the Church, they cease to be isolated verses and become a means by which the soul contemplates Christ, crucified and risen.

The Church: Purchased by Blood

Take the first of them. “Shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Church is not a religious organization, not merely a community of like-minded believers — she is the very Body of Christ, purchased not with gold or silver but with the divine blood of the Son of God. To understand this verse is to understand the dignity of the Church: she is the bride for whom Christ died, the living temple of the Holy Spirit, not a man-made construct. To treat her lightly, to neglect her sacraments, her teachings, her unity is to forget the cost at which she was bought. St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this verse, drives the point home:

“...which He has purchased with His own blood.” It shows how precious the concern is; that the peril is about no small matters, seeing that even His own blood He spared not.

He indeed, that he might reconcile those who were enemies, poured out even His blood. — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 44 on the Acts of the Apostles

He does not say “with His blood” but “with His own blood” showing the intensity of the sacrifice. He who shed it was not man only, but God. Approach the Church, then, not as a critic or a consumer, but as one beholding a mystery. Love her because He loved her first, and gave Himself for her.

A Sacred Responsibility

One of the most sobering verses in the New Testament follows the same thread:

*“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and **insulted the Spirit of grace?**” (Hebrews 10:29).*

To despise the Blood of Christ is to insult the very Spirit who sanctifies you. Salvation is not only a gift — it is a responsibility. You are accountable to grace. The blood of Christ is not common, not ordinary; it is sacred, powerful, divine, the means by which you are set apart for God. When you fall into sin after baptism, the Church calls you to repentance through confession and tears — not because you've lost God's love, but because you must not grow cold to the cost of your redemption.

Blood as a Weapon in Spiritual Warfare

Revelation shifts the focus from contemplation to warfare:

“And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death” (Revelation 12:11).

The blood of Christ is not only your cleansing, it is your weapon. When the devil accuses you of sin, you don't argue your own righteousness; you plead the blood. You don't turn inward under guilt; you turn outward, toward the altar, toward the Cross, toward the Lamb who was slain. The blood of the Lamb is the foundation of the martyrs' courage and the faithful's perseverance. Even today, the Church is persecuted, her children martyred, her teachings mocked yet the blood remains the victory. It is not something shed only long ago; it is ever present, ever powerful, ever interceding.

Christ's Blood Compared to Abel's

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ speaks better things than that of Abel, because the blood of Abel was seeking revenge. God said to Cain, “The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground” (Genesis 4:10) — while the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ was seeking forgiveness of sins: “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Forgiveness Before the Cross

Forgiveness stands at the center of our understanding of salvation. Yet when we speak of those who lived before the Cross of Christ, we must tread carefully and precisely. Many were declared righteous in

the Old Testament — Noah, Abraham, Moses, David — yet Paradise remained closed. Why? Because the remission of sins was not yet accomplished in essence; it was only anticipated in shadow.

Scripture does not say David was forgiven, but rather that his sin was 'put away' (2 Samuel 12:13). The Hebrew phrase carries a legal nuance — a sin deferred, set aside temporarily. Why not 'forgiven'? Because, as Hebrews solemnly reminds us, 'without the shedding of blood there is no remission' (Hebrews 9:22). The blood of animals, offered year after year, could never cleanse the conscience nor satisfy divine justice (cf. Hebrews 10:1-4). The sacrifices of the Old Covenant functioned as placeholders, pointing forward to a greater Sacrifice.

What happened, then, to the sins of the righteous before Christ's crucifixion? They were not erased; they were transferred. The ledger of every righteous man bore the ink of sin, but through faith and covenantal obedience, that debt was placed upon the One to come. In the fullness of time, Christ carried those ledgers to the Cross.

Our Lord's words to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven you' (Luke 5:20, NKJV), must be understood within this framework. They were not a retroactive cancellation but a prophetic promise, issued by the One who knew precisely what He would pay. The authority of forgiveness was real, yet the transaction would be settled on the Cross. The same pattern appears in the case of the sinful woman who washed His feet with her tears (Luke 7), of the tax collector who cried, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' (Luke 18:13, NKJV), and of Zacchaeus the publican (Luke 19). To each of these, Christ extended forgiveness, not because the Cross was unnecessary, but precisely because it was certain.

Conditions for Salvation

Christ said His blood is shed for many (Matthew 26:28), but in reality only few are saved (Matthew 7:13-14; John 6:52-66). Salvation, in Orthodox theology, is neither a blanket pardon nor a transactional exchange — it is union with God, a healing, a restoration, a participation in divine life. While the Cross is the foundation and fountain of this gift, its benefits aren't automatically distributed; they are mediated through conditions divinely instituted for your free cooperation. As St. Paul wrote, "We then, as workers together with Him, also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1). God doesn't impose salvation; He offers it, and you have to receive it rightly.

The First Condition: Faith

The first condition is faith — the root of your response. Without it, no other condition can take root. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). But this faith isn't passive belief or intellectual agreement; it's living trust, obedient assent, fidelity to the covenantal promises of God. Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3), but that belief compelled him to leave his homeland, to offer up Isaac, to live as a stranger awaiting a better country. Even before the Cross, faith was necessary. After the Cross, faith has to be placed not just in God generically but in Jesus Christ specifically; crucified, risen, ascended, and returning.

The Second Condition: The Sacramental Life

The second condition is the sacramental life — Baptism, Confirmation, Repentance and Confession, and the Eucharist. These are the saving Mysteries through which Christ's saving work is applied to you personally, and this lesson returns to each of them in turn below.

The Third Condition: Good Works

The third condition is good works — the fruit of authentic faith. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). The one who truly believes is the one who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, forgives the enemy, and bears the Cross. Works without faith are barren; faith without works is a corpse. Salvation is synergistic — not in that you merit it, but in that God honors human freedom and asks for your cooperation. As St. Augustine wrote, “He who created you without you will not save you without you”.

Necessary Clarifications

A few clarifications keep these conditions from being misapplied. Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist don't apply directly to the people of the Old Testament, because they draw their saving efficacy from the blood of the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit, which belong to the New Testament. Even so, the Old Testament faithful had symbols of these Sacraments — circumcision, for instance, standing in symbolically for Baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). The conditions above apply to normal, responsible adults while challenged individuals and infants who don't possess the intellectual capacity to understand and believe, could lighten expectation of the condition of faith.

The Sacrament of the Priesthood administers to you the saving Sacraments and so plays a major role in your salvation — you don't have to become a priest to be saved, but you need priests for your salvation, since they are “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). It thus must be said that the conditions for salvation differ based on one's capacity and the dispensation in which one lives:

- Faith remains a universal requirement, yet infants and the mentally disabled are not judged by the same measure as responsible adults.
- The Holy Sacraments, especially Baptism, Chrismation, and the Eucharist, are essential for those living after the Cross.
- The priesthood is indispensable—not as a personal condition for salvation, but because priests are “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). Through them, we receive what Christ purchased for us.

Salvation Is the Story of Your Whole Life

Salvation is not merely a singular historical event relegated to the past; it's an ongoing, dynamic reality encompassing the entirety of human existence. St. Paul's words capture the paradox: “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

A Threefold Understanding: Saved, Being Saved, Will Be Saved

To grasp the Orthodox concept of salvation, hold it in a threefold lens:

- **Past:** You believe that **you have been saved**, having put on our Lord Jesus Christ in Baptism, the initial step in the journey.
- **Present:** You believe that **you are being saved** through the sacramental life of the Church, an ongoing process nourished by regular reception of the Eucharist, confession, and the other sacraments.
- **Future:** And you believe that **you will be saved**, by God's mercy, on the Last Day of Judgment — the eschatological dimension in which the fullness of God's Kingdom will be realized.

This understanding is a journey initiated through Baptism, nurtured through the Church's sacramental life, and ultimately fulfilled in the age to come. It calls for a lifelong commitment to spiritual growth, since salvation is not a static state but an ongoing process of drawing closer to God.

The Sacraments: The Grace-Filled Means of Salvation

The story of salvation starts with faith, repentance, and Baptism, and continues through the whole sacramental life of the Church. What follows traces each of the Mysteries in turn: what each one gives you, and why none of them is optional.

Baptism: Death and Rebirth

To many modern Christians, Baptism is reduced to a symbol — a public declaration or outward ritual. But in the ancient Church, and throughout the Orthodox Tradition, Baptism is the very door to salvation. It is not a sign of salvation already achieved; it is the means by which salvation begins in you. It is nothing less than participation in the Pascha of Christ: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

A Real Union, Not a Symbol

St. Paul is not being poetic here — he speaks of a real union. In Baptism the old man is buried and the new man rises. Just as Christ died and was buried, so you descend into the waters; just as He rose, so you emerge from the font, not only cleansed but reborn. St. Cyril of Jerusalem described exactly this to the newly baptized: after you were led to the holy pool of Divine Baptism and asked whether you believed in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and had made that saving confession,

You were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine Baptism... and each of you was asked, 'Do you believe?'... you descended three times into the water, and ascended again; here also hinting by a symbol at the three days burial of Christ. — St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 20 (Mystagogic Catechesis II), §4

Tomb and Womb

The Baptismal font is a tomb and a womb — a place of death and rebirth. You do not emerge as an improved version of yourself; you emerge as a new creation. Salvation is not abstract, believed only in the mind; it is embodied, lived, received, entered into. It begins at the font, where the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection becomes yours.

“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:5

“Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” Romans 6:3

“Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” Acts 2:38

What Baptism Accomplishes

This remission includes original sin as well as all actual sins committed before Baptism. In Baptism you are buried with the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:12); you die and rise with Him in the newness of life (Romans 6:4): “Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:6). Through Baptism you become a child of God and a member of His body, the Church: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Chrismation: The Gift of the Spirit

Following Baptism, the Orthodox Church immediately administers Confirmation — anointing with holy Myron — as the personal Pentecost of every believer. Just as the Apostles received the Holy Spirit through fiery tongues, so you receive Him through the anointing of the body.

“You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Ephesians 1:13

“You have an anointing from the Holy One.” 1 John 2:20

Becoming a Temple of the Spirit

You consequently become a temple of the Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Confirmation is not optional; it is essential — without the Spirit, Baptism would be incomplete. Salvation is not simply forgiveness; it is divine life dwelling in you. As a result of your response to the work of the Holy Spirit within you, you grow spiritually and bear the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Rite of Anointing

The anointing is made on the forehead, eyes, nostrils, mouth, ears, chest, hands, and feet — sanctifying the whole person. The priest proclaims, “The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit,” and the people answer, “Amen.” This is the divine signature, the imprint of the King upon His newly born servant.

The Eucharist: Communion with the Crucified and Risen Christ

At the Last Supper, our Lord took the cup and said, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28). When we receive this cup at the altar, we are

not merely remembering a past event. We are receiving, here and now, the very blood by which God accomplished our salvation—the blood that inaugurated a new covenant between God and mankind.

"This Is My Blood": Not a Symbol, But a Mystery

The Eucharist is not a metaphor—it is a mystery. St. Ignatius of Antioch made this the test of true faith itself, writing against those who denied it: "Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions... they abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again." Notice that Ignatius ties the Eucharist to both the cross and the resurrection in a single breath: the flesh that suffered is the same flesh the Father raised. Communion is never severed from either.

Because this is no ordinary bread and cup, Scripture speaks of it with the highest possible language. St. Paul charges the elders of Ephesus to "shepherd the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28), and the author of Hebrews asks, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). This is why St. John can write, "There are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one" (1 John 5:8)—the Church has long read this as pointing to baptism and the Eucharist, the two mysteries through which the Spirit applies Christ's saving work to us personally.

The Blood That Saves, Now Given to Us

Scripture describes what Christ's blood accomplished at the cross, and it is this same blood we receive at communion. Our salvation was an act of great mercy: our Father offered His Son for our sins and for the sins of all who came before, "having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:9), because "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7) and "in Him we have redemption through His blood" (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14). Our Savior "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5), "having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20). None of this is abstract history. Each time we approach the chalice, we are brought into direct contact with the event that accomplished it.

Better Than the Blood of Abel

Scripture calls Jesus "the Mediator of the new covenant, and... the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). The comparison is deliberate. The blood of Abel cried out for justice against his murderer—God said to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10). The blood of Christ cries out for something else entirely: forgiveness. As He hung on the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Abel's blood demanded an accounting. Christ's blood, which we receive at the altar, pleads mercy on our behalf.

Communion with the Risen Christ

Yet the Eucharist does not leave us at the cross. Christ Himself said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven... whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him" (John 6:51–56).

This is communion with a living Lord, not a memorial of a dead one. St. Paul makes the same point: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16)—a present-tense fellowship with the risen Christ, sustained every time the Church gathers at His table.

It is fitting that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized the risen Jesus not in His teaching but "in the breaking of bread" (Luke 24:30–31). The Eucharist has always been the place where the Church meets her risen Lord face to face. And because we are united to Him in this mystery, we are united also to His resurrection life: "if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Romans 6:5).

The Eucharist, then, holds together what must never be separated: the blood shed on the cross for the remission of sins, and the living, risen Christ who gives Himself to us at the altar. In receiving Communion, we do not merely recall His death—we partake of His life. As St. Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26): a death that saves us, proclaimed by a Church already living in the power of His resurrection.

Repentance & Confession: Human Fallibility

Renewed, Not Infallible

Unfortunately, you still sin after being baptized and confirmed. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Baptism truly renews us, as St. Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), raised to "walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). This renewal, however, does not make us infallible. The Church has always taught that the nature we receive in Baptism is pure yet still liable to sin, much as Adam's nature was before the fall: capable of standing, but also capable of falling. The gift of regeneration you receive in Baptism does not cancel the gift of free will. God renews the will; He does not remove it.

The Difference After Baptism

There is a difference, though, between people who sin without being baptized, living a life of wickedness, and those who sin after Baptism. The latter have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them to rebuke them and lead them to repentance. Because of this indwelling presence, sin after Baptism is meant to be temporary—a fall to be gotten up from, not a permanent condition.

It becomes permanent only when a person, by his or her own free will, refuses that call to repentance altogether. Scripture describes this refusal in the strongest possible terms. St. Paul, in the book of Hebrews, warns that one who deliberately tramples the gift of salvation "has insulted the Spirit of grace" (Hebrews 10:29), a willful, final rejection of the very grace that would restore him. This is not the same thing as any single sin, however serious; it is the settled refusal of grace itself, the kind of hardened rejection Christ calls blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, "which will not be forgiven" (Luke 12:10); not because God's mercy runs out, but because the one who rejects the Spirit's call has cut off the only means by which mercy reaches him.

The Path Back: Repentance and Confession

This is why the ordinary Christian life is not one of despair but of return. Through repentance and confession you are restored: "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

That restoration is renewed after confession each time you approach the Holy Eucharist, as the priest says in the Divine Liturgy, "given for us salvation, remission of sins, and eternal life to those who partake of it"—recalling Christ's own words, "whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). The Eucharist does not re-earn your salvation as though it were lost and regained each time; it is the continual means by which the one salvation given to you in Baptism is sustained, renewed, and deepened as you return to God in confession and repentance.

Working with Grace: The Test of Your Faith

Salvation is not a moment, nor a singular transaction of grace; it shaped by faith, refined through trials, sustained by the sacraments, and sealed in enduring love for Christ. It's a journey in which you walk not merely as a recipient of divine mercy but as a combatant in a lifelong spiritual struggle.

Scripture reminds you from the very beginning that your life is a proving ground for your faith:

"Now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

These trials aren't random cruelty; they're purposeful refinement, gold tested by fire and they come within an invisible war: "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against... the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). The devil stalks the earth like a lion (1 Peter 5:8), but you're called to resist him, clothed in the armor of God and watchful in prayer. As St. Paul reminds you elsewhere, you "must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Enduring to the End

It is not enough merely to begin the race. Our Lord made it clear: "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22). Salvation is not a sprint but a pilgrimage. St. Paul understood this when he wrote of disciplining his own body, "lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27). He exhorted the faithful to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) and to "conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17).

Kept by the Power of God

This vigilant perseverance is only possible through the sustaining power of Christ. You are “kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). Your salvation isn't static; it's a narrative whose final chapter is unveiled on the last day. That's why the Lord says, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

The Lamb: Beginning, Sustenance, and Hope

The foundation of this long journey is the Lamb of God. In Him is your beginning, your sustenance, and your final hope. “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). His blood is the seal of the New Covenant: “Without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 9:22). Just as the Israelites were saved from death through the blood of the lamb (Exodus 12:13), you too are saved by Christ's blood, which marks your heart and consecrates your life: “And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb” (Revelation 12:11).

Called to Follow His Pattern

This Lamb is not only your Redeemer but also your model in purity and a renewed start: “These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). He endured, and so you too must endure. He suffered, and so you must not be surprised by suffering. He was misunderstood, and you, too, should expect resistance. As you walk the path of salvation, keep your eyes fixed on Him: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things... but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

A Solemn Warning

Yet not all welcomed Him, even though His blood was poured out for all — and the rejection of the Son of God is a solemn warning: “Of how much worse punishment... will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot... and insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:29). This makes your calling urgent. Christ's sacrifice is not to be taken lightly, for He did not enter a sanctuary made with hands but the true heavenly Holy of Holies, to bring eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12).

Living as a Faithful Steward

Your story of salvation continues. You live each day not as a passive recipient of grace but as a faithful steward of the mystery entrusted to you. With the sacraments as your nourishment, repentance as your daily posture, and the Lamb as your guide, you press on to the very end. Since the spiritual struggle and warfare takes up your whole life, salvation is indeed the story of your whole life — and your enduring, saving grace. And He who endures shall inherit all things, and God will be his God, and he shall be His son (Revelation 21:7).



Review Questions

1. What symbol is our Lord compared to throughout the Old and New Testament? (A: a

lamb)

2. How can we adequately use the salvation that our Lord has generously provided us? (A: Baptism, repentance, confession, and leading a holy life in Christ.)
3. Name one instance of foreshadowing of Christ's bloodshed. (A: Hebrews 12:24)
4. True or false? Jesus is mentioned in the Old Testament. (A: True)
5. What are the saving sacraments? (A: Baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, repentance, and confession.)
6. How is the symbol of blood used differently in the Old vs. New Testament, specifically regarding Abel? (A: Blood in the Old Testament was shed out of revenge, as with Abel and Cain, whereas after Christ's sacrifice in the New Testament it came to symbolize forgiveness.)
7. How does Baptism factor into our salvation and journey to heaven? (A: In Baptism we are buried with our Lord Jesus Christ, and it serves as a regeneration for each of us in Christ.)
8. True or false? After Baptism you are no longer liable to sin. (A: False)
9. True or false? We receive renewed salvation every week during the Holy Eucharist. (A: True)
10. Why does Paradise remain closed to the Old Testament righteous until the Cross? (A: Because "without shedding of blood there is no remission" — their sins were put away, not yet forgiven, until Christ's blood was shed.)

Primary Patristic Sources	Further Reading
Against Heresies, Book V, Preface — St. Irenaeus of Lyons Catechetical Lectures 20 & 22 (Mystagogic Catecheses II & IV)— St. Cyril of Jerusalem Homily 44 on the Acts of the Apostles — St. John Chrysostom	To the Smyrnaeans, ch. 7 (primary source) — St. Ignatius of Antioch Sermon 169.13 (cited in CCC 1847) — St. Augustine of Hippo The Orthodox Way — Metropolitan Kallistos Ware

The Second Coming

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

A Doctrine of Watchfulness, Not Speculation

The Church confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ 'shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.' This lesson studies the Second Coming not as a topic of speculation but as a doctrine of watchfulness. You'll consider Christ's omnipresence in the time between His ascension and His return; the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as a type of the final coming; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as an abiding presence of the Son; the unknowable hour of His return; and the signs that precede His appearing, including the Antichrist, the Great Tribulation, and the renewal of all things in the New Heaven and New Earth. The Church places this entire mystery before you neither to instill fear nor to inflame curiosity about dates, but to form in you a life of vigilance, repentance, and sustaining hope. 'Watch therefore,' our Lord says, 'for you do not know when the master of the house is coming.'

Present With Power

Christ's First Coming and Second Coming don't negate the fact that He is omnipresent. The First Coming extends from His Nativity to His Ascension. In the time between the First and Second Comings, His presence remains with you, especially in the Eucharist and wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

"And He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.'" Mark 9:1, NKJV

A Threefold Fulfillment

In parallel sayings, the Lord tells His disciples that some standing with Him will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:27) and the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom (Matthew 16:28). The Church has long contemplated these sayings, and the Fathers have seen in them a threefold fulfillment:

- the Transfiguration, in which the divine glory was shown to Peter, James, and John;
- the Resurrection and Pentecost, by which the Kingdom was inaugurated in power; and
- the ongoing reality of the Kingdom as it breaks into the world through the Mysteries and the lives of the faithful.

Already and Not Yet

These interpretations aren't rivals to one another. Each opens a dimension of the same truth: the Kingdom is both already and not yet. It's already present through the Eucharist, the Church, and the life of grace; it's not yet consummated in the fullness that awaits the Second Coming. This tension is deeply pastoral. It keeps you from dreaming of the Kingdom as only a future prize and from reducing it to a

merely present experience. You live between the two advents, receiving the first and waiting for the second.

Two Comings Already Glimpsed in History

This coming of Christ was already apparent on two occasions in the first century, each showing His Kingdom present with power through the preaching of the Gospel by the early Christians: the judgment that fell on Jerusalem, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Both deserve a closer look, because both teach you something about how God comes.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

The destruction of the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is reckoned by the Fathers as a 'coming' of Christ; a coming in judgment upon the city that rejected Him. Our Lord foretold it plainly:

“See! Your house is left to you desolate.” Matthew 23:38, NKJV

“When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” Matthew 10:23, NKJV

In the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21), the Lord intertwines His words concerning the destruction of the Temple with the language of His Second Coming. This isn't confusion. The events of A.D. 70 are a type; a shadow prefiguring the final judgment. What happened to Jerusalem stands as a solemn witness that the Lord isn't indifferent to the rejection of His voice, and that every 'house' built apart from Him will finally be found desolate. The destruction of the Temple therefore matters for your spiritual vigilance. It teaches you to read history with the eyes of faith and to recognize that God's comings, whether in judgment or in mercy, are woven through the fabric of time.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit

The prophet Joel foretold signs in connection with the Day of the Lord, and he connected these signs to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

“The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord.” Joel 2:31, NKJV

Pentecost as a Coming of the Lord

At Pentecost this prophecy began to find its fulfillment. The Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles; they spoke in tongues; and the proclamation of the Gospel went forth into the world. The Fathers of the Church understood this descent as a 'coming' or 'presence' of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, for the Spirit who descended is the Spirit of the Son.

“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you... What is this power except the Son Himself — 'Christ the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24)?” St. Athanasius — Discourse Against the Arians

St. Athanasius equates the promised power of the Spirit with the Son. The arrival of the Spirit is not an independent act but an extension of the Son's power, revealing the unity within the Godhead. Christ told the Apostles they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8), and St. Paul names Christ Himself as 'the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24). Pentecost, in other words, isn't simply an isolated event in the past; it's a continuation of Christ's ministry in the life of His Church.

Every Divine Liturgy, every anointing, every breath of repentance is a participation in this same descent. The Lord hasn't left you alone between His comings. He is present with you by the Spirit, who is Himself the presence of the Son until the Son returns in glory.

When Is Christ Coming?

Throughout the New Testament, the theme of Christ's Second Coming is consistently accompanied by an emphasis on its unpredictability. The Lord Himself repeatedly stressed that the precise timing of His return would remain unknown until the moment it occurs. This is not a puzzle withheld to tantalize us; it is a pastoral strategy intended to form in us a constant readiness.

“Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Matthew 24:44, NKJV

“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Mark 13:32, NKJV

“Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming — in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning — lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!” Mark 13:35-37, NKJV

The Book of Acts likewise records the Lord's answer to the disciples' last question before His Ascension: 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority' (Acts 1:7, NKJV). The consistent message of the New Testament is clear: the time of Christ's return is unknown and unpredictable. Attempts to calculate the date are not only futile; they miss the whole point of the teaching. The unknown hour is itself the lesson. It calls the Church to vigilance — to live each day as though today were the day, and to live each day faithfully as though our days were many.

What Events Will Happen Before the Second Coming?

Before walking through the signs themselves, keep three things in mind. First, the element of surprise is part of the teaching itself — these events aren't given so you can chart a timeline, but so you recognize the pattern when it appears. Second, it's possible some of these things have already occurred in part and will occur again, more fully, before the end. Third, some incidents may be repeated metaphorically

rather than literally, echoing earlier fulfillments without being identical to them. With that caution in place, three things happen in the time between the Ascension and the Second Coming.

1. All Things Restored

The period between the Lord's Ascension and His Second Coming holds a special name in the apostolic preaching. It's called the 'times of restoration.'

"Whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began." Acts 3:21, NKJV

These moments of restoration aren't reserved only for the final day. They began long before, at least by the time of St. John the Baptist. The Lord Himself said:

"Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him." Matthew 17:11-12, NKJV

The groundwork for the restoration of all things was laid before the Lord's Ascension and continues to unfold through the ministry of the Church. Hebrews calls this the 'time of reformation' (Hebrews 9:10, NKJV) — an age in which the shadows of the Old Covenant give way to the reality of the Gospel. This current age is therefore dynamic and evolving. It's marked by the ongoing process of restoration initiated in the preaching of the Baptist and fulfilled at the coming of the Lord. It's a time in which external observances alone don't suffice; what's required is the living relationship of faith in Christ nourished by the Mysteries of the Church.

2. The Conversion of Israel and the Times of the Gentiles

St. Paul unfolds a profound mystery concerning the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles in the economy of salvation.

"For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob.'" Romans 11:25-26, NKJV

A partial blindness, the Apostle teaches, has come upon Israel. It isn't permanent but temporary, lasting until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. When that fullness is attained, a turning point will occur, and 'all Israel will be saved.' This doesn't require that every Jewish individual receive Christ; it speaks of a national restoration and a profound spiritual awakening. The Apostle's teaching is undergirded by the Lord's own prophecy:

"They will... be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Luke 21:24, NKJV

The relationship between Jew and Gentile in the divine economy isn't one of replacement but of grafting. The Gentiles are grafted into the olive tree of Israel, becoming partakers of the promises

originally bestowed upon the patriarchs. You wait not for the triumph of one branch over another but for the ingathering of all into the one Body of Christ.

3. The Beginning of Sorrows and the Great Tribulation

The Lord describes a progression of signs that will precede His return. These signs fall into two stages: the Beginning of Sorrows and the Great Tribulation. The Beginning of Sorrows is characterized by:

- False christs: deceptive figures claiming the name and role of the Messiah, drawing many astray.
- Wars and rumors of wars: global conflicts and escalating tensions producing fear and instability.
- Famines: widespread hunger and food shortage causing suffering.
- Pestilences: deadly diseases sweeping the world.
- Earthquakes: natural disasters bringing destruction and displacement.
- The spread of the Gospel: the proclamation of the Gospel to all the world in spite of these troubles.

The Great Tribulation intensifies these signs. The deception becomes more convincing, with false christs and false prophets performing signs and wonders. The love of many grows cold. A general falling away, an apostasy of widespread scope, takes place. And at length the Antichrist is revealed. These prophecies are given not to instill fear but to cultivate spiritual preparedness.

“It is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour... He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.” 1 John 2:18, 22, NKJV

The first century already witnessed many antichrists in the form of false teachers. Every generation of the Church has seen its own. The pattern continues until the final Antichrist is revealed. In every age, you're called to discern, to resist, and to remain grounded in the truth of the Father and the Son.

The Antichrist

St. Paul gives the clearest apostolic warning concerning the Antichrist:

“Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.” 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, NKJV

A Cryptic Number

The Antichrist is marked by blasphemous self-deification and opposition to God. The Book of Revelation identifies him by a cryptic number:

“Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon... Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: his number is 666.” Revelation 13:11, 18, NKJV

A Traditional Reading: The Tribe of Dan

A traditional interpretation holds that this figure will arise from the tribe of Dan. The patriarchal prophecy calls Dan 'a serpent by the way, a viper by the path that bites the horse's heels so that its rider shall fall backward' (Genesis 49:17, NKJV). The name of Dan is also absent from the list of tribes in Revelation 7:4-8, which has fueled this traditional reading. These clues offer some insight, but the full identity of the Antichrist remains hidden until the appointed hour. The Church doesn't speculate concerning names and dates; she preaches vigilance. The Lord has given you enough to recognize the pattern and to remain faithful. The particulars belong to God.

What Will Happen at the Second Coming

The Lord's return will unfold with a series of manifestations, each a glorious and terrifying sign of the Kingdom established in power.

First: Universal Disturbance

'Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Matthew 24:29, NKJV). St. Luke records the same disturbance from another angle: 'And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken' (Luke 21:25-26, NKJV). St. Peter adds: 'The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up' (2 Peter 3:10, NKJV).

Second: The Sign of the Son of Man

'Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn' (Matthew 24:30, NKJV). The Fathers identify this sign with the Holy Cross, which will shine with a brilliance clearly visible to all when the sun and moon have been darkened. The Cross, which was once the scandal, will be revealed as the throne.

Third: The Appearing of Christ in Glory

'They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory' (Matthew 24:30, NKJV; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27). 'Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him' (Revelation 1:7, NKJV). No one will escape witnessing this return.

Fourth: The Trumpet and the Resurrection of the Dead

'Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed' (1 Corinthians 15:51-52, NKJV). The Lord Himself will 'send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other' (Matthew 24:31, NKJV). St. Paul continues: 'For the Lord Himself

will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, NKJV).

Fifth: The Trepidation of the Wicked

Even on His way to the Cross, the Lord warned of this day: 'Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" And to the hills, "Cover us!"' (Luke 23:30, NKJV). At the Second Coming this cry becomes universal. The kings of the earth, the great men, and the mighty will hide themselves in caves and in the rocks of the mountains, saying to the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!' (Revelation 6:15-17, NKJV). Earthly power will offer no refuge in that day.

Sixth: The Final Judgment

'When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world..." Then He will say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." (Matthew 25:31-41, NKJV). The judgment isn't based on abstract knowledge but on the fruit of faith: deeds of love and mercy done for the least of the Lord's brethren are done unto Him.

The New Heaven and the New Earth

After the judgment, the vision of St. John opens upon the eternal dwelling of the redeemed:

"Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.'" Revelation 21:1-4, NKJV

This is not merely the restoration of what was lost; it is a renewal, a transformation into something greater than Eden. The sea, often a biblical image of chaos and separation, is no more. The Holy City descends from God, adorned as a bride for her Husband, signifying the intimate union between God and His people. The tabernacle of God is no longer a temporary structure; it is His permanent dwelling with us. Tears, death, sorrow, and pain — every weight humanity has borne since the fall — are eradicated.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” 1 Corinthians 2:9, NKJV (cf. Isaiah 64:4)

Living in Anticipation

The hour of Christ's coming is unknown, and as our Lord has said, He will come like a thief in the night. It is therefore for us to stay awake and to watch, lest we miss our time of visitation. The eschatological hope presented in these passages is not a distant ornament added to the Christian life; it is the very light by which we see our present path. It gives purpose to our days, steadies our courage in trials, and fuels our longing for the One who first loved us. This is the life of the Church: living in anticipation of the glorious day when Christ will return and establish His eternal Kingdom.



Review Questions

1. Do we know when Jesus Christ is coming again? (A: NO we don't know and in Mark 13:32 Matthew 24:44 it tells us that we do not know the day or the hour.)
2. In the book of Revelations, it says the “Beast's” name or his number, what is it? (A: 666)
3. What are some of the signs that will happen before the second coming? (A: Universal destruction, the sign of the son of man, the appearance of Christ in His glory, trumpet and rapture, trepidation of the Wicked, judgment: recompence & chastisement, heaven.)

Predestination

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Few doctrines have divided Christians more painfully than the doctrine of predestination. In one direction it has been pressed into a determinism that empties the Cross of its universal love; in another it has been softened into a sentimentality that denies the seriousness of the human response. The Orthodox Church refuses both extremes. We confess a God who foreknows all things because He is eternal, and who calls all to salvation because He is love, yet who will not override the freedom He Himself planted in the human heart. This lesson walks through the scriptural passages most often cited in this debate, places them within the mind of the Fathers, and shows why the Protestant doctrine of unconditional election and irresistible grace is a grave departure from the apostolic faith. Our aim is not to win an argument but to protect the souls entrusted to our teaching from a doctrine that produces either despair or false security, and to steady them in the humble, synergistic, sober hope that the Church has always held out.

Predestination According to Foreknowledge, Not According to Will

The decisive Orthodox distinction in this entire subject can be stated in a single sentence: predestination in the apostolic faith is grounded in the foreknowledge of God, not in a prior decree of His will that some should be saved and others damned. St. Paul never once teaches that God sovereignly chose certain individuals to salvation before creation while passing others over. He teaches something quite different, and far more consoling.

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Romans 8:28-30

The order of the sentence is the key. St. Paul does not say that God works all things for good in those whom God loves; he says that God works all things for good in those who love God. Salvation is not a package handed down to a passive recipient; it is a covenantal response from a heart that has chosen to love. And the predestination that follows flows from what God has already foreknown concerning that heart's love.

St. Peter makes the same point with the same precision when he greets the Christians of Asia Minor.

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 1:2

The election is real. The foreknowledge is real. But the election is according to the foreknowledge, not the foreknowledge according to the election. The distinction is not a clever play of prepositions. It is the hinge on which two entirely different pictures of God turn. In one picture God looks down from eternity,

sees who will love Him, and honors that love with the gift of final glory. In the other picture God looks down from eternity, decrees that this soul shall be saved and that soul shall be damned regardless of anything they do, and then works history to bring about that decree. The first picture is the faith of the apostles. The second is not.

The Will of God That All Should Be Saved

Before turning to the harder verses, we must set down what the Scriptures say directly and without qualification about the will of God toward the human race. The verses are plain, and they govern every other passage we will read.

"Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men." (Titus 2:11)

"He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:2)

These four witnesses together forbid any reading of any other passage of Scripture that ends in God's willing the damnation of some while willing the salvation of others. God's universal saving will is not one voice among many in the apostolic writings; it is the settled premise from which every other text must be read. When a particular verse seems to push against it, we have misread the verse – not caught the Spirit contradicting Himself.

On this premise the whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination rests. God desires the salvation of every person He has ever made. Christ died for every person He has ever made. The Holy Spirit is offered to every person He has ever made. What differs from soul to soul is not the offer but the response. And because that response lies in the free will God Himself has honored, predestination names what God foreknows the response will be, not what God has unilaterally decreed it must be.

Jacob and Esau: A Verse That Must Be Read in Context

Romans 9 is the chapter most often pressed into the service of an unconditional predestination, and verse 13 is the line most often pulled out of it.

"Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." Romans 9:13

Read alone, the verse is jarring. Read in its context, it tells a different story. The very next verse shows that St. Paul himself anticipated the objection his readers would raise — the same objection the Calvinist reading raises today — and he rejected it outright.

"What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!" Romans 9:14

If St. Paul's meaning had been that God arbitrarily decrees some to eternal loss before they are born, the charge of unrighteousness would be unanswerable, and the Apostle's indignant denial would be empty. St. Paul denies it because he does not teach it. He is speaking of God's choice of vessels and peoples in the outworking of the economy of salvation, not of the eternal destinies of individual souls. God loved Jacob and placed him in the line of promise. God loved Esau too — He willed his salvation as He wills every man's — but foreknew that Esau would despise his birthright and trade the heavenly for a bowl of soup. The love of God for both was equal; the hatred is directed at the godless choice Esau made against the promise.

The same pattern is visible in the very next apostolic example the chapter reaches toward.

“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace.” Galatians 1:15

Here is St. Paul, set apart from the womb by the sovereign foreknowledge of God. And yet what do we find him doing for the first thirty years of his life? He is persecuting the very Church he was predestined to build. The man set apart from the womb was dragging Christians to prison. If predestination obliterated free will, this could not happen. But it did happen, because foreknowledge names what God knows, not what He compels. The One who knew from before the world that Saul would become Paul did not, in that knowing, reach down and move Saul's feet toward Damascus as a puppet's feet are moved. Saul walked his own road, chose his own rage, and at last, on the Damascus road, chose — in freedom — to fall before the voice that had always been calling him.

The Potter and the Clay

The second great passage of Romans 9 is the image of the potter and the clay, and here too the Calvinist reading and the Orthodox reading diverge sharply.

“Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?” Romans 9:21

A careless reading takes this to mean that the potter forms some lumps for honor and other lumps for dishonor according to no reason at all — a sheer bare act of sovereign will. But a careful reading, and a patristic reading, notes something the careless reading misses: the potter is wise, and the potter is just. It would be absurd that a wonderful lump of clay would come into the hands of this wise potter and that he would make of it a vessel for dishonor. And on the other hand, if the clay is rough and unfit to be a vessel for honor, the potter — bound by the nature of the material before him — will be obliged, because of its condition, to make of it a vessel for lesser use. The will of the potter is always to make every lump a vessel of honor. What the clay becomes depends, under the wise potter's hand, on what the clay is.

The prophet Jeremiah sets the full meaning of this image before us.

“Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull

down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.” Jeremiah 18:6-10

This is the sovereignty of God rightly understood. The potter has absolute power. The potter also has absolute wisdom. And the potter exercises His power precisely by responding to the clay — blessing what turns toward Him, withdrawing the blessing from what turns against Him. Sovereignty does not mean indifference to the response of the thing He is shaping; it means that He is free to honor that response with absolute justice. The story of Nineveh is the standing biblical illustration. God told Jonah that in forty days the city would be overthrown. The city repented. God relented. Was God fickle? Was God's first word a lie? No. God's word was always conditioned on the clay, as every word of judgment is — and the city, once doomed, became the city saved.

The Protestant Heresy of Unconditional Election

Against this ancient and sober faith stands a doctrine that arose out of the Reformation and was hardened by Calvin into the teaching called unconditional election, commonly summarized under the acronym TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints). The doctrine holds that God, before the foundation of the world and without reference to any foreseen response, chose some human beings to eternal life and passed over the rest, leaving them in their sin. Christ died, on this reading, only for the elect. The grace given to the elect cannot be resisted. And the elect, once saved, cannot possibly fall away.

It is necessary to say plainly what the Orthodox Church has always said: this doctrine is a heresy. It contradicts the universal saving will of God. It contradicts the universal scope of the Atonement. It contradicts the plain testimony of Scripture that the Holy Spirit can be resisted, grieved, and insulted. And it produces two twin spiritual diseases that no pastor of souls can fail to recognize.

The first disease is despair. A soul that has come to believe it may not be among the chosen — that no amount of repentance or love or labor can change its eternal destiny if the secret decree has gone against it — is a soul thrown back upon itself with nothing to cling to. It cannot look at the Cross and know that Christ died for it, because the doctrine of limited atonement forbids that certainty. It cannot look at its own repentance and find evidence of God's working, because the doctrine teaches that the non-elect can mimic repentance and still perish. This is the soil on which Puritan despair grew thick, and it has not ceased to produce its bitter harvest wherever the doctrine is preached.

The second disease is presumption. The other soul under this teaching reasons that since it has once made a decision for Christ, since it feels itself among the elect, nothing now can separate it from salvation — not any sin, not any apostasy, not any return to the old life. This is the doctrine often preached in its popular form as "once saved, always saved," and it dissolves the fear of God and the moral seriousness of the Christian life into a cheap confidence that has no scriptural warrant. The Protestant teaching thus produces, in one household, the brother who trembles because he may not be

chosen, and the brother who presumes because he is certain he is. Both are without the sober hope of the Gospel.

Can a Believer Fall Away? The Testimony of Scripture

The whole Protestant system collapses the moment Scripture teaches that a true believer can fall from grace and perish. And that is precisely what Scripture teaches, plainly and in many places. We will take only the two clearest witnesses.

The first is St. Paul's olive-tree warning to the Gentile believers in Rome.

“And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.” Romans 11:17-23

The grafting in is real. The standing in the tree is real. And yet St. Paul warns, in the same breath, that the grafted-in branch can be cut off. Not a hypothetical unconverted pew-sitter — the branch that is already drawing sap from the root. The warning would be empty if it could not happen. But St. Paul's warnings are never empty. A true believer can fall.

The second witness is even clearer, because it names the very doctrine Protestantism has invented.

“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?” Hebrews 10:29

The person described here was sanctified by the blood of the covenant. He was a genuine partaker of grace. And he has fallen. The decisive phrase for our purposes is "insulted the Spirit of grace." The verb is active and intentional. The Spirit of grace has been resisted, spurned, pushed away. If grace were irresistible, as Protestant doctrine claims, the phrase would be impossible. Scripture here tells us not only that a believer can fall, but that the very mechanism by which he falls is the rejection of a grace that could have been received. The doctrine of irresistible grace is refuted in a single line of Scripture.

The Cautionary Case of Nicolaus the Deacon

The Book of Revelation refers, in the letters to the seven churches, to the deeds of a group called the Nicolaitans, and speaks of those deeds with divine severity.

"But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

Revelation 2:6

Tradition identifies the namesake of that sect as Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven proto-deacons chosen by the apostles themselves, ordained alongside St. Stephen the Protomartyr. Acts 6 names him in the same breath with the others: "Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte from Antioch." He was chosen by the Spirit, laid hands upon by the apostles, set into the service of the Church. And he fell. He became a heretic. The sect that took his name was condemned by the risen Christ Himself in the words of Revelation.

This is not an obscure footnote. It is a case study, built into the foundational history of the Church, of a man who received the fullness of the Spirit's call and later rejected it. If he could not fall, the warnings of Scripture are theatre. If he could then every teaching that makes the believer's perseverance automatic falls to the ground with him. The Church remembers Nicolaus not to dishonor him but to warn us. No grace received today exempts us from the watchfulness required tomorrow.

Synergy: The Orthodox Vision of Grace and Freedom

What the Orthodox Church teaches instead of unconditional election and irresistible grace is the ancient doctrine of synergy; the co-working of divine grace and human freedom in the one work of salvation. It is the doctrine St. Paul preaches in a single breath without blushing at any tension:

"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." Philippians 2:12-13

The same verse speaks of what we do and of what God does, and sets the two in the most intimate cooperation. We work out our salvation. God works in us to enable both the willing and the doing. The Father's grace goes before, accompanies, and follows every good act of the will. But the will is our own, and it is ours to yield or to refuse. This is the balance the Fathers hold everywhere.

"He who made you without you will not save you without you." — St. Augustine, Sermon 169.13

One sentence, and the two errors are cut away. Against Pelagius and his modern descendants: He who made you without you — salvation is pure gift, not wages. Against Calvin and his modern descendants: will not save you without you — the gift must be received by a free and willing heart. The whole Orthodox doctrine of predestination lies between those two clauses. God wills all to be saved. Not all will be. What differs is not God's love — that is equal for every soul — but the response the soul freely gives. And because God is God, He has always known that response before the world was made. That is what predestination is. That is all it is.



Review Questions

1. If God wants us all to be saved, how come some people perish? (A: Despite God wanting all to be saved, not all are saved and that's because of their free will.)
2. Since God has the foreknowledge of who will use their free will to be saved and who will not, how is this freewill if it is predetermined? (A: God's foreknowledge of our actions does not interfere with our free will. Some may use it to gain salvation, some may use it to lose salvation.)
3. All things work together for good to those who God loves. (A: False, notice that St. Paul says that all things work together for good to those who love God, he did not say, to whom God loves.)
4. Can a believer perish? (A: Yes)