

“Lord, remember David and all his afflictions...” (Ps 132:1)

✠ Lecture I: On Praying for the Departed ✠

Due to the entrance of sin to the world, the spirits of all those who departed used to go to Hades. Nevertheless, as our Lord mentioned in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (**Lk 16:19-31**), there was a distinction between the righteous and evil spirits; Lazarus was comforted and the rich was tormented. Notice that the fire mentioned is symbolic and not physical and may indicate the torments of regret and guilt. After the redemptive death of our Savior on the cross, He descended into Hades and released all the spirits of the righteous and took them with Him to Paradise.

- “...He went and preached to the spirits in prison.” (**1 Pet 3:19**)
- “Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ Now this, ‘He ascended’ – what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens” (**Eph 4:8-10**).
- “I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.” (**Zech 9:11**)
- “Have the gates of death been revealed to you? Or have you seen the doors of the shadow of death?” (**Job 38:17**)

→ Notice that the first believer who went directly to Paradise without going to Hades was the right thief. Also, as a result of releasing of the righteous spirits after the death of Lord Jesus Christ, it was written, “the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (**Mt 27:52**)

Today, there are two separate and temporary places for the spirits of the departed. The righteous go to Paradise where they are comforted and the evil go to Hades where they are tormented. On the Last Day, after the general resurrection, all the righteous spirits will be united with their bodies and will be moved to the heavenly Jerusalem and all the evil spirits will be also united with their bodies but moved to the lake of fire – “Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” (**Rev 20:13,14**)

+ Biblical Proofs for Praying for the Departed:

- St. Paul prayed for Onesiphorus after his departure from this world, “the Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day” (**2 Tim 1:18**).
- The Holy Book of Psalms teaches us to pray for David the King, “Lord remember David and all his afflictions” (**Ps 132:1**).
- Judas Maccabeus who made “propitiation for those who had died” (**2 Maccabees 12:39-45**).
- The spirits of the martyrs were crying to God to avenge their blood (**Rev 6:10**) – “then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer...” (**v 11**) – Thus, the condition of the spirits of the saints may change and we pray for them to be comforted.

Q1: How are the spirits comforted or tormented before being judged on the Day of Judgment?

A1: H.H. Pope Shenouda III explains this by the analogy of students who go out of the exam room knowing how they performed on their test and even though the scores are not announced many are comforted and are sure they passed but others are worried and feel that they definitely failed.

Q2: Who are they whom the Church does not pray for?

A2: In accordance with the words of St. John, “There is a sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that” (**1 Jn 5:16**), the Church does not pray for those who died in their sins without repentance like those who committed suicide for instance for the prayer will not benefit them anyway. Notice also that we pray that the spirits may be reposed in Paradise not in purgatory.

* This lecture is adapted from, ‘*The Salvation that We Are Awaiting*’ by Fr. Shenouda Maher.