

EVANGELION  
The Power of God

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**Chapter 5**  
**THE**  
**EASTER STORY**

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# CHAPTER 5

## THE EASTER STORY

### *GOD'S TRILOGY*

Adam and Eve lost Paradise. They lost the ability to see the kingdom of God. They lost the ability to hear the kingdom of God. They lost the ability to live in the kingdom of God. They chose death, and the life of God that fills Paradise began to fade from their view, began to drain away until Adam and Eve were only left with living in death.

Life withdrew from them and they found themselves on the outside of life. They were expelled, excluded, from Paradise. They were “banished from paradise into this world”<sup>1</sup> of death. They became refugees wandering in the strange land of death.

We tend to think geographically: they were expelled from a particular location.<sup>2</sup> But geography is a metaphor. They were expelled existentially and ontologically. What they once saw, they no longer could see. What they once heard, they no longer could hear. The kingdom of God disappeared, and though still present, became absent to them. They were banished from the realm of Life to the realm of Death. Life drained out of them and they became walking dead men.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Basil the Great, Prayers of the Holy Anaphora, *The Liturgikon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Englewood, New Jersey: The Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, 1989), 281.

<sup>2</sup> See Fr. Deacon Ezra, *These Things We Believe*, for a discussion of the historicity of Adam and Eve and their historical location on earth.

But in the fullness of time God's plan of restoration reached fulfillment. God's purpose for mankind had never changed. Mankind's purpose, mankind's goal, was to become like God. What Adam failed to achieve, what each of us has failed to achieve, God achieved on our behalf. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>3</sup> As St. Athanasius stated and the Orthodox Church affirmed, God became man so that we could become God—could become like God.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of creation is union with God. Union with God is called *theosis* or *deification*. In the fullness of time God undertook the restoration of mankind to Paradise. This restoration involved three distinct steps: the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

#### *GOD'S PLAN RESTORED*

“Adam did not fulfill his vocation.”<sup>5</sup> Adam and Eve did not achieve the purpose for which they were created. They did not achieve *theosis*—union with God. “But the plan of God was not destroyed by the sin of man; the vocation of the first Adam was fulfilled by Christ, the second Adam. God became man in order that man might become god, to use the words of Irenaeus and Athanasius, echoed by the Fathers and theologians of every age.”<sup>6</sup>

According to St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394 A.D.), “The infinite distance between the created and the uncreated, the natural separation of man from God which ought to have been overcome by deification, became an impassable abyss for man after he had willed himself into a new state,

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:14

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Constantine Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), 133.

<sup>6</sup> Lossky, 133-134.

that of sin and death, which was near a state of non-being. In order to reach that union with God, to which the creature is called, it was then necessary to break through the triple barrier of sin, death and nature.”<sup>7</sup>

The path of *theosis*—deification—planned for Adam and Eve became impossible after they chose death instead of life. “The divine plan was not fulfilled by Adam; instead of the straight line of ascent towards God, the will of the first man followed a path contrary to nature, and ending in death. ... What man ought to have attained by raising himself up to God, God achieved by descending to man. That is why the triple barrier which separates us from God—death, sin, nature—impassable for men, is broken through by God in the reverse order.”<sup>8</sup>

Nicholas Cabasilas, a Byzantine theologian of the fourteenth century (1322-1391 A.D.) expressed it this way, “The Lord allowed men, separated from God by the triple barrier of nature, sin and death, to be fully possessed of Him and to be directly united to Him by the fact He has set aside each barrier in turn: that of nature by His incarnation, of sin by his death, and of death by His resurrection.”<sup>9</sup>

### *THE INCARNATION*

The division—the separation of God’s nature and our nature—is overcome in the Incarnation of Christ—who is fully God and fully Man. “For St. Maximus (580-662 A.D.) the incarnation (σαρκωσις—sarkosis) and deification (θεοσις—theosis) correspond to one another; they mutually imply each other. God descends to the world and becomes man, and man is raised towards divine fullness and becomes god, because this union of two natures, the divine and the

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<sup>7</sup> Lossky, 135.

<sup>8</sup> Lossky, 135-136.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Lossky, 136.

human, has been determined in the eternal counsel of God, and because it is the final end for which the world has been created out of nothing.”<sup>10</sup>

God became flesh and dwelt among us. God became the Second Adam to remind us and to show us what we are to become. Christ was fully God and fully Man. The Incarnation unites the two natures, the divine and the human together. The Incarnation also sets before us our goal and our purpose: to become like God. We are meant to unite the divine and the human within ourselves. Theosis is not generic. It is personal.

In the West spirituality often is defined at the expense of the human. The more “spiritual” one becomes the less human they seek to become. But Christ was fully God *and* fully Man. Theosis, becoming like God, is not a negation of being human. We live in a world of death. Our humanity is less than the full humanity Adam and Eve had at creation. We have lost our eye sight and our hearing. We have lost the life of God coursing through our lives.

My family does not care how “spiritual” I am. They don’t care how many hours I pray or whether I pray kneeling on sharp rocks until my knees bleed. They don’t care. They do care whether I am becoming a better husband and father. Am I more patient with them? Am I more attentive? Am I more compassionate towards them, kinder and gentler? If my being around God makes me a better person, then my family will thank God for it, and perhaps even be drawn to spend time with God themselves.

The Incarnation points us to our beginning in Paradise and points us to our humanity that we have lost. We are less than we were created to be when first created. Theosis, becoming like

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<sup>10</sup> Lossky, 136.

God, involves growing in our humanity as well as in becoming like God. Christ was fully God and fully Man. But we are not yet fully human. The Incarnation opens the door for us to become once again who we were when first created, fully human.

### *THE CRUCIFIXION*

The Crucifixion removes the barrier of sin that weakens our will and causes us to fail in our becoming like God. St. Gregory of Nyssa said that “sin is an invention of the created will.”<sup>11</sup> It isn’t the devil that makes us sin, it is our own weak will. Since Adam and Eve’s failure to say no to death and yes to life, we now lack the will power to say yes to life and no to death.

The term *hamartia*, sin, means simply to miss the mark, to aim at a target and miss the bull’s eye. It means to fail at one’s purpose, to miss the point. Hamartia, in its largest sense, means to miss the point of one’s life.

At my chrismation into the Orthodox Faith I entered the church as Ezra. I was drawn to this Old Testament prophet because, “Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Even though I was not a teacher, there was a cry within me to do the same.

When I was ordained a sub-deacon in February, 2000 my private chrismation name became public at this ordination. Since then, I have taught nearly non-stop every week at St. Elijah as well as retreats and seminars. In addition, I was asked to teach at the University of Central Oklahoma.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Lossky, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Ezra 7:10 in a Protestant Bible.

I mention this because I never knew I was a teacher. I did not know this is who I am. I was over fifty years old, and did not know who I was vocationally. I had lived my whole life missing the point of my own life. I thank God that he showed me who I was while there was some time left to be who I am.

We live in a world of sin, a world that misses the point of life. I was blind to my own identity. But in a far greater sense mankind is blind to its identity. We are missing the point of our own lives, the point of our own creation. We don't need to buy a book that tells us how to have a purpose in life. We are created for a purpose and that purpose is to walk with God in the cool of the evening and become like him. We exist because God has called us by name. Our purpose is to become who God meant us to be when he called each of us by name.

Sin is the product of a weakened will. "The good I want to do, I fail to do, while the evil I don't want to do, I do anyway."<sup>13</sup> Sin is an issue of our weakened will. I have good intentions to go home after work and mow the yard, clean the spare room, read a book, or do my exercises. But when I get home I spend the evening watching television instead. The issue is not that I did something morally bad, it's that my will is so weak I cannot even do what I wish to do and what I intend to do.

We are all sinners. We each have a weak and defective will. Death is the only cure for a weak will, the only cure for sin. In my Protestant days I was the pastor of a small country church. A young couple had two children—both diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a cancer that strikes

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<sup>13</sup> Romans 7:18-19

infants and children. The odds were astronomical that two children in the same family would have this kind of cancer.

Tracey was seven when she died. The family had gathered in her hospital room when she died in her uncle's arms. Her father, racing to get there from work, walked in moments after she died. I was in the room. It was the first time I had ever seen a person die.

Having killed Tracey, the cancer now furiously attacked her younger brother, Tony. With one child buried, the parents doubled their efforts in trying to save their remaining child. But the cancer grew. The next six months were filled with emergency runs to the hospital for blood transfusions. Regularly scheduled cancer treatments were suffered and endured. But the cancer grew, disfiguring the little boy's face.

The physician treating Tony called me in. She explained everything had failed. The blood transfusions were no longer helping fight the cancer. In fact the transfusions were now feeding the cancer, causing it to grow. She asked my assistance in standing with this young couple as they made the toughest decision any parents could ever make, to stop the blood transfusions. These brave parents took Tony home. They didn't want him to die in a hospital like his sister. They called me that night. I went to their home. There were five of us there: the parents, myself, and the uncle holding Tony as he had Tracey. Two hours later I called the hospital and told them Tony had died. I helped the father as he carried his son in his arms to the car as we took Tony's body to the hospital.

The only way to kill the cancer was for Tony to die. The only way to kill the sin in us, to kill our weakened wills, is to die. Christ died on the cross to show us the death of sin. But how long does death last?

### *THE RESURRECTION*

On Sunday morning, the first day of the week, the Myrrh-bearing Women went to Christ's tomb to finish the funeral. They carried spices with them to perfume the body. At the tomb they were confronted with the reality of the Resurrection.

The Resurrection does not fit any human category. It is outside any matrix of thought. Beyond description, beyond comprehension and beyond explanation, the reality of the Resurrection met them.

God gave Moses the pattern of the earthly Tabernacle on Mt. Sinai. He told Moses to construct a box, an Ark to hold the Ten Commandments, and its lid, known as the Mercy Seat. Facing each other on top of the Mercy Seat were two cherubim with their wings outstretched across the Mercy Seat towards each other. God told Moses, "And there I will meet with you; and from above the Mercy Seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the Ark of the Testimony."<sup>14</sup>

God does not meet us inside the box, inside the Ark, with its laws. God meets us outside the box, between the wings of the cherubim, at the place of mercy.

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<sup>14</sup> Exodus 25: 22

“But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she beheld two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying.”<sup>15</sup>

She saw the flat, stone slab with an angel at each end. God said he would meet us between the angels at the place of mercy. It is in the Resurrection that God meets us. It is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ that completes the restoration and makes possible our return to Paradise.

Jesus told Dismas, the Penitent Thief, today you will be with me in Paradise. The Paschal Troparion declares: Christ has risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

In the Refrains of the Second Antiphon<sup>16</sup> of the Divine Liturgy we sing—

O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, save us who sing unto thee: Alleluia.

O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, save us who sing unto thee: Alleluia.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:

O Son of God, who art risen from the dead, save us who sing unto thee: Alleluia.

Both now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

O Only-begotten Son and Word of God, who art immortal, yet didst condescend for our salvation to be incarnate of the holy Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, and without change was made man; and was crucified also, O Christ our God, and by thy death didst Death subdue; who art one of the Holy Trinity, glorified together with the Father and the Holy Spirit: save us.

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<sup>15</sup> John 20:11-12

<sup>16</sup> Antiphonal hymns sung back and forth between the priests and the people.

The reality of the Resurrection is real. Death kills sin and our weakened wills. But Christ's Resurrection defeated Death. How long does death last? St. Paul said to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.<sup>17</sup> He proclaimed that the death that had swallowed us had itself now been swallowed in victory.<sup>18</sup> In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ what Hosea had foretold has come to pass—

I will deliver them out of the hand of Hades  
 And will redeem them from death.  
 Where is your penalty, O death?  
 O Hades, where is your sting?<sup>19</sup>

In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?”<sup>20</sup>

### *THE RESPONSE OF THOMAS*

At first the disciples did not know what to think. They ran to the tomb and found it empty like the women had said. Some believed. Others did not know what to believe.

Then Christ, the Risen Savior, appeared to them and they believed. All believed but Thomas who was not there in the Upper Room that Sunday. But he was there a week later when once more Christ appeared. In the face of revelation Thomas needed no empirical proof or rational explanation. He fell on his knees in worship, “My Lord and my God!”

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<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:8

<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54

<sup>19</sup> Hosea 13:14

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54-55

Thomas is not the great doubter. He is the great worshipper. If Christ has not been raised then our faith is worthless.<sup>21</sup> If Christ has not been raised then everything we believe and proclaim is false and worthless. If we only follow the teachings of Christ as a moral guide that we find beneficial to us in this life, one among many chosen out of personal preference, then St. Paul said “we are of all men most to be pitied.”<sup>22</sup> St. Thomas did not follow Jesus because he needed a moral code to follow. He fell on his knees and worshipped the Risen Savior, our Great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

### *OUR RESPONSE*

We gather every week on Sunday, the first day of the week, to celebrate the Resurrection. At Pascha (Easter) and for forty days thereafter, we sing the Troparion of Pascha. In addition to that Troparion the Orthodox Church has eight other Troparia for the Resurrection. We sing a different one each Sunday for eight weeks, then we cycle through them again. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is our victory over Death. We proclaim it every Sunday. Like Thomas we proclaim, My Lord and my God! by declaring the Resurrection every Sunday.

### TONE 1

The stone being sealed by the Jews,  
and thy pure body being guarded by the soldiers, thou didst rise on the third day, O  
Savior, granting life to the world. Wherefore, the heavenly powers acclaimed thee, O  
Giver of life, crying, Glory to thy Resurrection, O Christ! Glory to thy kingdom! Glory to  
thy gracious providence, O thou only Lover of mankind.

### TONE 2

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<sup>21</sup> I Corinthians 15:17

<sup>22</sup> I Corinthians 15:19

When thou, O immortal Life, didst humble thyself unto death, then didst thou destroy death by the brightness of thy Godhead; and when thou didst raise the bowels of the earth, then all the heavenly powers exclaimed, O Christ, thou art the Giver of life? Glory to thee, O our God!

### TONE 3

Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad; for the Lord hath done a mighty act with his own arm. He hath trampled down death and become the First-born from the dead. He hath delivered us from the depth of Hades, granting to the world the Great Mercy.

### TONE 4

Having learned the joyful message of the Resurrection from the angel, the women Disciples cast from them their parental condemnation, and proudly broke the news to the Disciples, saying, Death hath been spoiled. Christ God is risen, granting the world Great Mercy.

### TONE 5

Let us believers praise and worship the Word, co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, born of the Virgin for our salvation; for he took pleasure in ascending the Cross in the flesh, to suffer death, and to raise the dead by his glorious Resurrection.

### TONE 6

When Mary stood at thy grave looking for thy sacred body, angelic powers shone above thy revered tomb, and the soldiers who were keeping guard became as dead men. Thou led Hades captive and was not tempted thereby. Thou didst meet the Virgin and didst give life to the world; O thou that art risen from the dead, O Lord, glory to thee.

## TONE 7

Thou didst shatter death by thy Cross; thou didst open Paradise to the thief; thou didst turn the sadness of the ointment-bearing women into joy, and didst bid thine Apostles proclaim a warning that thou hast risen, O Christ, granting the world Great Mercy.

## TONE 8

O Compassionate One, thou didst descend from the heights; thou didst submit to the three-day burial, that thou mightiest deliver us from passion. Thou art our Life and our Resurrection, O Lord, glory to thee.

We stand in awe in the presence of the Resurrection. We cannot explain the Resurrection. We do not try. We stand in awe, and we worship. In our worship we tell what God has done. Holy Trinity, you have done this and this. But we do not stop with only a recital of what God has done, we then *respond* to what God has done, “Therefore, Glory to thee!” We worship. Standing in awe before the mystery of God in our lives, we worship.

*THE DEAD AREN'T DEAD*

“Christ is risen from dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.” For us, the dead aren’t dead. They are alive in Christ. He bestows life upon those in the tombs. “Thou didst shatter death by thy Cross; thou didst open Paradise to the thief.”

Dismas, the Penitent Thief, is not dead. Nor is St. Thomas dead. Both are invisibly present with us during our worship. They are part of the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us as they and we worship the Undivided Trinity simultaneously together in the Liturgy.<sup>23</sup> It is Thomas that leads us in declaring in worship, My Lord and my God. We point to Dismas when we say, “But like the thief will I confess thee: Remember me, O Lord, in thy kingdom.”<sup>24</sup>

Our departed loved ones in the Lord are not dead. They are alive in Christ. They are invisibly present during the Liturgy, worshipping the Undivided Trinity alongside us.<sup>25</sup>

Jesus told us, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be also.”<sup>26</sup> Notice he said, “That where I am, you may be also.” Christ is invisibly present with us as the High Priest and Liturgist of our worship. Christ tells us, that where I am, you will be. Christ is invisibly present, and our departed loved ones in the Lord are invisibly present where he is.

Hear the words of Christ. “I am the Resurrection and the Life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”<sup>27</sup> My death will kill my wishy-washy will; will kill my weak will and the missing the mark that it brings. But Christ tells us that even if we die, we shall never die. He says, “Because I live, you shall live also.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>24</sup> Orthodox Communion Prayer

<sup>25</sup> See Stephen Freeman ‘s description of the lives of the monks at Mar Saba, “”These were not ghostly visits he was describing, but the living presence of the saints who inhabit the same space as ourselves.” Stephen Freeman, *Every Where Present: Christianity in a One-Storey Universe* (Chesterton, Indiana: Conciliar Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>26</sup> John 14:2-3

<sup>27</sup> John 11:25-26

<sup>28</sup> John 14:19

“Thou didst shatter death by thy Cross; thou didst open Paradise to the thief.”<sup>29</sup> “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”<sup>30</sup>

The dead aren't dead.

*THOU DIDST OPEN PARADISE TO THE THIEF*

Through Adam and Eve we lost Paradise. We lost the Kingdom of God. We lost the ability to live in a world that united the seen and the unseen. Paradise never left; it became invisible. The Kingdom of God never left; we lost the eyesight with which to see it. Our ears became deaf to God's voice.

But in the fullness of time, the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. Through the Incarnation God united divinity and humanity within himself as fully God and fully Man.

Through the Crucifixion our weak wills will die in our own death. And through the Resurrection the dead aren't dead.

Through his Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection God has opened Paradise to the thief. He has re-opened Paradise for all who believe. Christ stands over the shattered gates of Hades and releases Adam and Eve and restores them to Paradise with him.

The company of the angels was amazed, when they beheld thee numbered among the dead, yet thyself, O Savior, destroying the power of death, and with thee raising Adam and releasing all men from hell.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Resurrection Troparion, Tone 7

<sup>30</sup> Paschal Troparion

<sup>31</sup> The Evlogetaria from the Orthodox Orthros Service.

Wherefore, O Women disciples, do ye mingle sweet smelling spices with your tears of pity? The radiant Angel within the sepulcher cried unto the Myrrh-bearing Women: Behold the grave, and understand; for the Savior is risen from the tomb.

Very early in the morning did the Myrrh-bearing Women run lamenting to thy tomb; but an Angel came toward them saying: The time for lamentation is passed; weep not; but announce unto the Apostles the Resurrection.

The Myrrh-bearing Women mourned as bearing spices, they drew near thy tomb, O Savior. But the Angel spake unto them saying: Why number ye the living among the dead? In that he is God is risen from the grave.

#### *REPENT AND ENTER PARADISE*

To the living and to those in the tombs Christ proclaims a single message, Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent for Paradise is at hand. The message of the Resurrection is a singular message proclaimed to the living and to those in the tombs: Death is defeated. Paradise is re-opened to those who will enter.

Blessed art thou, O Lord, teach me thy statutes.

The Choirs of the Saints have found the fountain of Life and the Door of Paradise. May I also find the right way, through repentance. I am a lost sheep. Call me, O Savior, and save me.

Blessed art thou, O Lord, teach me thy statutes.

I am an image of thy glory ineffable, though I bear the brands of transgressions: Show thy compassions upon thy creature, O Master, and purify me by thy loving-kindness; and grant me the home-country of my heart's desire, making me again a citizen of Paradise.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hymns following Psalm 90, Orthodox Funeral Service.

I will not give thee a kiss as did Judas, “But like the thief will I confess thee: Remember me, O Lord, in thy kingdom.”<sup>33</sup>

*HERE ALREADY—NOW ALREADY*

Here already. Now already, the Kingdom of God is at hand. The Kingdom of God that has been invisibly present is now once more accessible. The Kingdom of God in which the visible and the invisible, the heavenly and the earthly, the divine and the human dwell simultaneously, is at hand. Paradise is re-opened. Repent and believe the Gospel.

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<sup>33</sup> Communion Prayer, the Divine Liturgy.