

On Salvation: My Salvation and the Salvation of Others

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

St. Sophrony recounts a conversation between St. Silouan and a hermit who, with a sense of satisfaction, remarked, "God will punish all atheists. They will burn in everlasting fire."

St. Silouan, with visible sorrow, responded, "Tell me, supposing you went to paradise, and there you looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire – would you feel happy?"

The hermit replied, "It can't be helped. It would be their own fault." With deep pain, St. Silouan said, "Love could not bear that... we must pray for all people."

From this conversation, I reflect on the nature of salvation—both in general and specifically concerning the salvation of non-believers. This question often arises in pastoral visits: What about the salvation of non-believers or non-Orthodox?

A short article cannot comprehensively address this complex topic, but I will offer a few essential points concerning our Orthodox faith on the matter.

Our Christian faith clearly affirms the Last Judgment at the end of time. The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46 is explicit. What a person does during their earthly life leaves an imprint on their soul, carrying into life after death. The parable mentions that Christ will conduct the judgment, as salvation depends on faith in Him. Christ is the judge of all humanity on the last day.

We understand, however, that no single parable or verse can fully encapsulate the Faith. We rely on the entirety of Christ's teachings. For instance, we cannot conclude from the parable of the sheep and goats that faith is irrelevant to the final judgment just because the parable emphasizes works of love. Elsewhere, Christ says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). We must consider all divine words and understand the context of each passage, recognizing the danger of isolating verses to fit personal interpretations rather than divine intent.

The Orthodox faith preserves what has been handed down from the beginning, emphasizing that there is no salvation outside Christ, baptism, and the Church. This raises the question: What about non-believers?

In his discussion of salvation through the law, St. Paul says that those who have the law (the Old Testament) and follow it are justified. Meanwhile, those “who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...” (Romans 2:14-15). Paul concludes that everything will be revealed openly on the last day, “when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16). St. Paul does not explicitly affirm the salvation or destruction of those without the law, leaving the matter to the divine judge who knows the depths of every heart.

From this, we understand that those who follow the path God revealed through Christ, preserved by the Church and illuminated by the Holy Spirit, walk the path of salvation—or, more accurately, toward salvation. Yet, this does not guarantee their salvation. No one can guarantee their own salvation, for it is God who grants salvation, not man.

If the great Apostle Paul refrained from declaring the fate of others, and even his own fate (1 Corinthians 9:27), how can we, as sinners, presume to distribute salvation or deny it to those we deem worthy or unworthy? Our role is to hope for our salvation and the salvation of the entire world. Let us hope for the salvation of all and refrain from acting as gatekeepers of salvation. This is not our task. As believers, our duty is to walk faithfully in the way of salvation given to us, hoping for the redemption of all souls.

The Orthodox spiritual teaching warns us against imagining that we have attained holiness and are thus assured of salvation. On the contrary, the Church emphasizes humility and repentance, and thus to consider ourselves unworthy to dwell in God’s light. We know the path to salvation, laid out by God in the Church, and we walk it hoping for salvation but without presumption. Only God, who knows the secrets of every heart and mind, can determine who is worthy of salvation.

After enduring a severe spiritual trial, God told St. Silouan: “Keep your mind in hell, and do not despair.” This means acknowledging that we are unworthy of the kingdom of heaven but never losing hope in God’s mercy. This teaches humility and

encourages us to persist in spiritual struggle, purifying our souls, and seeking God's presence ever more deeply.

Salvation belongs to God. Our role as believers is to hope for the salvation of all and to pray for it. For ourselves, we must work toward our salvation by following the path God has granted us in the Church. In humility, we become true witnesses to Christ, revealing Him to others through our example. At the same time, we fervently pray for the salvation of all people – even all creation.

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:19-23).