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Paradise and Hell According to Orthodox Tradition

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On the Last Sunday of Lent "we commemorate the Second and Incorruptible Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ". The expression in the Synaxarion, "we commemorate" confirms that our Church, as the Body of Christ, re-enacts in its worship the Second Coming of Christ as an "event" and not just something that is historically expected. The reason is that, through the Holy Eucharist, we are transported to the celestial kingdom, to meta-history. It is in this orthodox perspective, that the subject of paradise and hell is approached.

In the Gospels (Matthew, ch.5), mention is made of "kingdom" and "eternal fire". In this excerpt, which is cited during the Liturgy of this Sunday, the "kingdom" is the divine destination of mankind. The "fire" is "prepared" for the devil and his angels (demons), not because God desires it, but because they are without repentance [i.e., unwilling to turn, to re-think, and participate in redemption]. The "kingdom" is "prepared" for those who remain faithful to the will of God. The uncreated glory is Paradise (the "Kingdom"). "Eternal fire" is hell (v.46). At the beginning of history, God invites man into paradise, into a communion with His uncreated Grace. At the end of history, man has to face both paradise and hell. We shall see further down what this means. We do however stress that it is one of the central subjects of our faith — it is Orthodox Christianity's "philosopher's stone."

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Mention of paradise and hell in the New Testament is frequent. In Luke 23, 43, Christ says to the robber on the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise". However, the robber also refers to paradise, when he says: "Remember me, Lord...in your kingdom". According to Theofylaktos of Bulgaria (PG 123, 1106), "for the robber was in paradise, in other words, the kingdom". The Apostle Paul (2Cor.12:3-4) confesses that, while still in this lifetime, he was "swept up to paradise and heard unspoken words, which are impossible for man to repeat." In Revelations, we read: "To the victor, I shall give him to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of my God" (2:7). And Arethas of Caesaria interprets: "paradise is understood to be the blessed and eternal life" (PG 106, 529). Paradise, eternal life, kingdom of God, are all related.

References on hell: Matthew 25:46 ("to everlasting torment"), 25:41 ("everlasting fire"), 25:30 ("the outermost darkness"), 5:22 ("the place of fire"). 1John4:18 ("...for fear contains toment"). These are ways that express what we mean by "hell".

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Paradise and hell are not two different places. Such an idea is an idolatrous concept. Rather they signify two different conditions [ways or states of being], which originate from the same uncreated source, and are perceived

