



Can We Know We Are Saved?

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

There is ample evidence in God’s word which demonstrates that salvation, in a true sense, is undoubtedly a present reality. The certainty of salvation is part of the experience of knowing Jesus Christ as Savior.

It is God’s fond desire for those whom He has adopted as His children. True, the completeness of salvation comes after death when the soul unites with the resurrection body. The body in the meantime awaits its redemption at the return of Jesus. Nevertheless, what is of crucial importance is the fact that salvation begins in this life. Yes, we not only have the right to claim we are saved, but an obligation in being true to our actual experience and to confess it verbally.

To deny the certainty that salvation is ours in this present life flies in the face of the explicit teaching of Scripture: *“In Him we have redemption through His blood the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).*

Notice the present tense of the verb **“have.”** God’s word does not say **“shall have.”** It says **“we have redemption.”** We have salvation right now.

St. John the Apostle wrote: *“I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:13).* St. Paul clearly speaks of salvation as a present reality when he says: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8).* And again: *“He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13).*

Scripture gives us overwhelming evidence that already we have

redemption, indeed we already have eternal life. The above texts are only a few of the countless testimonies from the Bible that proclaim that salvation begins from now, as the rightful and immediate possession of those who have become children of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are to be pitied above all men if we claim to be Christians and yet lack the certainty from now that we will be received by Jesus into His heavenly kingdom when we pass on. To deny that a believer can be certain of Heaven for himself is to deny the very promises of Jesus Christ.

The Lord set down certain conditions that are to be met for salvation. They are explicit and unambiguous. The moment we meet those conditions we have the assurance of salvation. As a matter of fact, the “newness of life” in the Holy Spirit is a foretaste of heaven. The Spirit witnesses to our own spirit that we are saved.

To accept the Gospel is to accept that the promises of Christ are unailing. When He says in His word we are saved by meeting His conditions, then we are saved and there is no room for doubt on the matter. God’s word is final. To question the promises of Jesus is to commit the sin of unbelief and disobedience. The evangelist says: *“He who believes in Him is not condemned” (John 3:18).* Now if we are not condemned, obviously we are set free from Satan’s bondage, and if we are free in Christ,

naturally we possess salvation. We have more than simply the assurance of going to Heaven when we die. We already experience salvation here and now. If we are no longer “under condemnation,” then we are children of God and already members of God’s household. How is it logically possible to be fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God without the assurance of salvation?

If you are presently a member of the Body of Christ, the Church Triumphant, assuming you remain in a state of grace until your last breath. Jesus distinctly said: *“The kingdom of heaven is within you!”* Heaven is already on the inside of you, child of God. That means you are saved. Saved from what? Saved from condemnation and the curse of Adam. You are redeemed, providing you keep walking in the Spirit to the very end of your earthly existence.

Not only are we certain of Heaven according to St. Symeon the New Theologian, but we actually have the experience of heaven from now. *“I cannot even begin to enumerate,”* he teaches, *“the things that Christ will become to those who believe in Him, not only in the age to come, but first in the present life. Although in this life these blessings are dimmer; while then they will be more perfect, nevertheless, all the future blessings believers receive from now and experience clearly already as the first fruits. They neither enjoy all the promises here nor do they simply hope for everything then, remaining in the meantime destitute of and inexperienced in the future blessings.” (Theological and Moral Discourses 10, 700).*

Satan robs us of that certainty

It’s nothing but a trick of the devil to say that everything good comes beyond the grave. That there

is nothing on this side but gloom and misery. The devil is a thief, and his job is to rob God's children of their joy and hope. He tells you that you have to feel gloomy in this world. You have no assurance of Heaven nor the blessings of joy and peace here. Don't you dare say, "I know that I'm saved." That's pride. That's being presumptuous. You have to be humble and silent, as you sit there guessing whether you'll be in Heaven or in Hell when you pass on.

To think that God would keep us guessing as to whether He will receive us into Heaven or consign us to the place of eternal torment! What a mockery of the Gospel! What a travesty of God's will for man! What madness! What blasphemy!

The "hope which is in us" is an expectation of Heaven and not merely a possibility of winning Heaven. It is a desire with expectation of obtaining what God has already promised to His children. Too many in the Church today permit Satan to rob them of the joy that such an expectation produces in their life. They believe it not right for them to claim certainty about Heaven. They think they are being humble this way and more spiritual.

If we have no right to claim certainty about heaven, then what is the good of receiving forgiveness at Communion! Is not the Holy Communion received for the forgiveness of sins, the purification of our soul and body and to the resurrection of our bodies in the last day? It is after the receiving of Holy Communion in which we sing: "We have seen the light, the true light and have received the heavenly Spirit. We have now found the true faith, by our worshipping the undivided Trinity who has saved us."

If we become "flesh of His flesh" in that ineffable identification with Jesus and still have to remain anxious

and uncertain about being saved, then we are most miserable among men. We are to be pitied. We have made God to be a sadistic overlord who delights in seeing His children live in a state of agony and anxiety. To keep wondering whether we are now saved is not God's will. It is not a sign of our humility. It is simply a tragic defeat for us and a victory for the Devil.

Salvation is a gift. We cannot earn it with our good works. Christ became a curse for us so that we might be found righteous before God. Unfortunately, to read some



of the desert Fathers is to get the impression that you are saved by toiling all your life and you never really know if you are saved. Thank God for St. Symeon the New Theologian and his wholesome teaching. This illustrious Spirit-filled Church Father teaches us as follows, regarding salvation: "He who believes from the heart and is informed that Christ came not to judge but to save him, and not by works nor by toil nor perspiration, but only by faith in Him. Those who are perfected in holiness and virtue were saved freely and not

by the works of righteousness. Since salvation is effected in the believers 'not by the works of the law that no one might boast' (Gal 2:16)."

We do not please our Father by telling Him: "Well, I don't know, Lord, if you will receive me into Heaven when I die. I am so unworthy. I'll keep trying and if it pleases you, receive me. But, I'll keep struggling and guessing in the meantime." A believer who lives a victorious life is one who not only knows with assurance he is saved, but confesses his victory and salvation by saying: **"Through the blood of Jesus I am redeemed out of the hand of the Devil!"**

It pleases God when His children know their privileges and confess their inheritance. How can you possibly be thankful to God for something you are not certain you already possess from Him? How can you delight in God so long as you feel only anxiety and fear concerning your salvation?

To be sure, salvation is not something to be taken lightly and for granted. On the contrary, you can be saved today and be ready for heaven, and yet, tomorrow be damned. "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

But the point is that we should know at every moment of our life whether we are saved or whether we are damned. It is the Spirit within us that is the guarantee of either Heaven or Hell. This is why we need to approach salvation in the fear of God. We can lose our salvation by backsliding and slipping into disobedience.

It is, however, one thing to "work out holiness with the fear of God" once you are saved and another thing to live with fear and anxiety because you don't know if you are saved. The fear refers to the need of retaining your salvation once you

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have received it and to the thought of being able to lose it.

The Reassurance of Jesus

Jesus Himself reassures us about our reward in heaven. The blessedness of Heaven begins in this life. In the sermon of the mount Jesus said that blessed are God's children here and now *"for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."* Now I am not trying to say that there is no spiritual growth once you are saved. The very opposite holds true. Your whole life is one long process of growth in the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is increasing in holiness *"without which no one will see God"* (Heb. 12:14).

Salvation is the born-again state of the believer. Rebirth, like the first, natural birth, is instantaneous. The moment the baby is delivered and its first cry is sounded you know the birth of the baby is completed. It is an accomplished fact. While salvation is instantaneous, growth, sanctification and holiness are always progressive, continuing throughout the believer's lifetime. Salvation comes with receiving Jesus as personal Savior, repenting of our sins, confessing our sins and receiving the baptism in water and in the Spirit and finally the Holy Communion.

The thief on the cross was in paradise with Jesus by meeting the conditions of faith and repentance. There was no time for baptism or Communion even though these are prerequisites for salvation set down by the Lord. There have been notorious sinners who have received the assurance of Heaven in a final moment of repentance on their death bed. Then there was the instance of the three thousand souls on the day of Pentecost that received salvation upon responding to Peter's preaching of the Gospel. They *"were added that day"* to the Church. They were saved within the time period of one day.

When you're saved from the curse of Adam through the blood of Jesus, you are just a spiritual infant. To be saved doesn't necessarily mean you are already perfect. It means that God has set you free from Satan's bondage so you can begin grow-

ing into the *"image and likeness of God."* But the important thing is that you are saved, liberated, no longer a child of wrath. You have made that transfer out of the *"dominion of darkness"* into the *"kingdom of God's beloved Son."*

Consequently, once you are *"born again of water and the Spirit"* you have to grow and attain the *"measure of the nature of the fullness of Christ."* No one is born instantly into a state of perfection no more than Adam was when he was created by God. Now if death cuts your growth short, you are still certain of Heaven, because of the earnest of the Spirit that God has placed into your heart. Imperfection in itself is not



necessarily sinful, though willful imperfection can be sinful and culpable.

Sanctification is a life-long process. It is part of our walk in the sanctifying Holy Spirit. It is not an achievement of one, single moment. It is a constant growth. There is no terminal point to sanctification and spiritual development.

Experiencing Heaven from Now

The Orthodox Church as a tender Mother, has always given the assurance of salvation to her children. The rubrics indicate that the officiating priest sprinkles the bap-

tized person eight days following his baptism with clean water, saying: *"You have been justified and illuminated."* Then he sponges his face, head and chest, saying: *"You were baptized; you were illuminated; you were chrismated; you were sanctified; you were washed in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."*

Child of God, the moment you come out of that baptismal font in faith and repentance and receive the Bread of life that comes down from Heaven, you were ready for Heaven. So long as you walk humbly before God and in obedience. Don't let anyone cheat you of your joy and rights. Confess your standing in Christ aloud. Affirm your position in Christ so Satan can hear you and flee from you.

False humility that keeps you guessing about your salvation is of the Devil. This is what makes so many in our churches today feel gloomy. They live miserable lives and think the more depressed they feel the more Orthodox and more spiritual they are.

God's word tells us: *"Whosoever is baptized in Christ have put on Christ."* If you have put on Christ then He envelopes your body, soul and spirit, like clothing over your whole being, you are saved. There's no possibility of being a child of Hell and an heir of damnation when you are clothed in Christ. You are saved. Confess your gift and hold on to it.

St. Symeon the New Theologian says: *"Those who say they have the Holy Spirit without an experience will not have an experience of eternal life.... As they are now, they will be then, without the experience of the Holy Spirit"* (Ibid. 5,230). If you are not certain about Heaven right now, don't expect to find Heaven beyond the grave.

If it were true that we do not share the future blessings from here and now, then neither do we elect ones already receive grace. Then Christ is a mere prophet and not God. As the apostle says: *"For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the*

The Renewal Message of St. Symeon the New Theologian

by Charles B. Ashanin, Ph.D.

St. Symeon is the third of three who have been recognized “Theologians” by the Orthodox Church along with St. John the Evangelist and St. Gregory Nazianzus.

Orthodox Christians have been inspired by his example and his anointed teaching for a thousand years. He died in 1022. Sadly, however, there remains widespread ignorance over his teachings, even among those who are privileged to have an Orthodox theological education.

St. Symeon is chiefly known among those Orthodox who have taken seriously the Orthodox position that the central issue of the Christian life is union with God through Jesus Christ. This doctrine is the core of the New Testament teaching. This was the dominant outlook of the early Church. Its conviction was such that the believers of the first three centuries preferred to die for their faith in Christ, rather than deny Him when their pagan persecutors unleashed on them a savage onslaught, executing them when they refused to apostatize.

Later on, the faith was systematized into doctrinal concepts. The doctrine on their union with God through Christ as the ultimate goal of life was implied in such Christological statements as that of St. Irenaeus and St. Athanasius that “*God became man in Christ so that man might become divine.*” Generally speaking, however, this doctrine was laid aside by later theologians as the pivotal vision of the Christian life. The exception were the believers who, after the church made peace with the Roman Empire in the fourth century, left the world of “secularized” Christianity and banded together into monastic communities. It was their way of protecting against the church becoming politicized.

The monastics felt that the church did the bidding of the Roman state rather than follow its own agenda that is, striving to manifest the Kingdom of God. It is a conscious participation here and now in the life of God. Christ has made it pos-

sible and the Holy Spirit actualizes it in the life of believers. They are the ones who seriously give themselves to doing God’s will as revealed in the gospels and the life of the church as guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately for the Orthodox Church, she came under the pressure of western Latin speaking Christendom



A Prophetic Voice

It was at this time God raised up Symeon the New Theologian 949-1022 A.D. to call the Orthodox to return to an experiential Christianity, one of an actual experience of Christ through prayer, asceticism and repentance. **His emphasis was upon focusing on the Holy Spirit. The function of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is to make them fully aware that God wants them to live in Him and not outside of Him.**

God, being love by His very nature, seeks union with man. Only through this union of love can God save the world, for outside of God’s love, which is His very life, there is only darkness and non-being.

St. Symeon called for a personal experience of faith rather than keeping God at arm’s length, so to speak, through contentment with religious externals and mere ritual. The Orthodox of his time had essentially succumbed to this impersonal kind of religious life. St. Symeon’s prophetic call to a personal relationship with Christ resulted in his persecution at the hands of the official church.

St. Symeon, however, persisted in passing on his teaching to a faithful band of followers through whom his teaching was preserved until the day the church finally acknowledged him as an authentic “Theologian” and Father among the saints. This came later in the fourteenth century when the Church was faced by the western scholastic teaching which aimed at converting Orthodoxy into Aristotelian theology, a theology devoid of spiritual content.

This controversy revolved around Balaam of Calabria, the proponent of western scholastic thought, and St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica and a theologian of *theosis*. It was finally resolved by the decision to affirm the empirical and mystical nature of theology in opposition to scholastic theology. And it was

this fact which caused the Church to give long overdue recognition and honor to St. Symeon by surnaming him “the New Theologian!”

St. Symeon is no longer for us Orthodox a name belonging to the past, but a living presence and inspiration in the here and now thanks to the labors of Archimandrite Father Eusebius Stephanou, who has endured many trials and tribulations in his effort to infuse into the Church an Orthodoxy of the Holy Spirit which St. Symeon the New Theologian had championed.