

The Journey Beyond Death

St. Theodora's Journey Through the Aerial Toll-Houses

According to the teachings of the Church, the particular judgment of souls by God is preceded by their torments, or rather a series of tests; these take place in the regions of the air, where the evil spirits have their domain (Eph. 6. 12). They detain the souls and declare and make manifest all the sins which these souls perpetrated during their lives. We know about these torments in great detail because they were revealed to Gregory, the disciple of the holy monk St. Basil the New, who lived in the first half of the Tenth century. Gregory in his vision learned about the hour of death and the passing through torments of a woman known as the Blessed Theodora.

When Gregory asked her to tell him about her passing away and about the circumstances that attended her death and followed it, she told him in great detail the following. "My child Gregory," she said, "you have asked me about a terrible thing, which it is frightening even to recollect.

"When the hour of my death came, I saw faces such as I had never seen before, and heard words such as I had never heard. What shall I say? Cruel and hard to endure evils, of which I formerly had no idea, encountered me then because of my evil deeds. However, through the prayers and the assistance of our common spiritual father Basil I was saved from these hardships. But how shall I tell you about that physical pain, that stress and close feeling which the dying experience? Like a man who, entirely naked, falls into a great fire, burns, melts, and turns into ashes; so the dying are destroyed by their deathly illness in the bitter hour when the soul parts from the body.

"When I drew near the end of my life and the time of my departure hence had come, I saw a great multitude of Ethiopians who had surrounded my couch. Their faces were dark like soot and pitch, their eyes were like glowing coals, their entire appearance was as frightening and evil as the fiery hell itself. They began to grow indignant and to make noise like dogs; others howled like wolves. As they looked at me, they were full of anger; they threatened me, kept rushing at me and gnashing their teeth, and appeared ready to devour me. Yet they seemed to wait for a judge who had not yet come but would do so: they were making ready charts and unrolling scrolls on which were written all my evil deeds. My miserable soul was taken by great fear and trembling. Not only the bitterness of death tormented me but even more the terrible appearance and the cruel demeanor of the frightening Ethiopians; these were to me like another death, only a worse one. I kept turning away my eyes in all directions so as not to see their terrible faces, and wished not to hear their voices, but I was unable to be rid of them. They turned everywhere and there was no one to help me.

"When I was at the end of my strength I saw two radiant angels of God, who were like youths of inexpressible beauty. They were coming toward me. Their faces were shining, their gaze was full of love; their hair was like snow, white with a golden tinge; their garments glistened like lightning and were girded with gold. When they came near me, they stopped on the right side of my couch and entered into a quiet conversation between themselves. As I saw them I was filled with joy and looked at them with pleasure.

"The black Ethiopians shuddered and retreated some distance. One of the radiant youths, angrily addressing the black ones, said: 'O shameless, cursed, dark, and evil enemies of the human race! Why do you always come first to the dying and frighten and confuse every parting soul by your words? You have no reason to rejoice, for here you will find nothing. God is merciful to this soul, and you

have no part and no allotment in her.' When the angel ceased speaking, the Ethiopians tottered, began to cry out, and mutter, and point to all my evil deeds, committed from my youth on. They exclaimed 'We have no part in her, you say! Whose sins then are these? Did she not do such and such?' With such exclamations they kept their position and were waiting for death. When death came, it was roaring like a lion and was very frightening in appearance. It looked like a human being but had no body; instead it consisted of human bones. Death brought various instruments of torture, such as swords, arrows, javelins, sickles, saws, and others unknown to me. When I saw these, my humble soul trembled with fear. The holy angels said to death: 'Do not tarry, free this soul from its bodily ties, and do it fast and quietly, for she has but a small burden of sins.' Death stepped up to me, took a small axe and separated my legs, then my arms; then with its other instruments it weakened all the rest of my limbs, separating them joint by joint. I lost the use of my arms and legs, my whole body grew numb, and I no longer was able to move. Finally death cut off my head, and I no longer could move it, for it felt as if it belonged to someone else. Lastly, death dissolved in a cup some kind of mixture, and putting the cup to my lips, made me drink. The potion was so bitter that my soul was unable to endure it. It shuddered and went out of my body.

"The light-bearing angels immediately took it in their arms. When I looked back I saw my body lying breathless and immovable. I looked at my body like someone who has taken off his clothes and thrown them down; this was a strange feeling. Meanwhile, although the holy angels were holding me, the demons, in their Ethiopian guise, surrounded us and cried: 'This soul has a multitude of sins—let her answer for them!' They kept pointing to my sins, but the holy angels sought out my good deeds; and indeed, with God's help they found all that, by God's grace, I ever did of good. The angels gathered together everything that was good: all those instances when I gave alms to the needy, or fed the hungry, or gave the thirsty to drink, or clothed the naked, or brought into my house and rested there the homeless, or served the servants of God, or visited the sick, and comforted them or those who were imprisoned; and also when I went with diligence to God's house and prayed with all my heart and shed tears, or when I attentively listened to what was read and sung in church, or brought to church incense and candles, or filled with oil the church lamps before the icons, or kissed the icons with awe and reverence; or when I fasted and abstained on Wednesdays, Fridays, or during other fasts, or when I prostrated myself before God and spent nights awake in prayer, or when I sighed to God and wept for my sins, or confessed my sins before my spiritual father with great regret for what I had done, and then tried with all my strength to balance my sins with good deeds; or when I did anything good to my neighbors, when I bore no anger to my enemies, bore no grudges and meekly endured hurts and reproaches, did good in return for evil, humbled myself, felt sorry for those who suffered and commiserated with those to whom anything bad happened, comforted those who were weeping and rendered them assistance, supported any good beginning and tried to turn people away from what was bad; or myself turned my eyes away from vanity and kept my tongue from oaths, lies, or bearing false witness, or speaking without need—and all my other good deeds, even the least important ones, did the holy angels gather and make ready to put on the scale in order to balance my evil deeds.

"The Ethiopians, however, saw this and gnashed their teeth at me. They wanted to tear me instantly from the angels' arms and to carry me down to the bottom of hell. At this time holy Basil himself appeared unexpectedly and said to the holy angels. 'Holy angels! This soul did great service to ease my old age, and therefore I prayed for her to God, and God has given her to me.' Having said this, he took something out that appeared like a little bag of gold and gave it to the angels with the words: 'Here is the treasure of prayers before the Lord for this soul! As you pass through the torments of the air and the evil spirits begin to torment her, pay her debts with this.'

"He then disappeared, but the evil spirits, when they saw the gift of holy Basil, at first stood dumbfounded. Then they raised plaintive cries and became invisible. Then Basil, the man who had pleased God, came again. He bore many vessels of pure oil and precious myrrh, and all these, one after the other, he poured on me. I was filled with spiritual fragrance and felt that I had changed and become very light. Once more the holy man said to the angels: 'When, holy angels, you will have done for this soul all that is needed, lead her to the dwelling that the Lord has prepared for me, and let her remain there.' Then he once more became invisible. The holy angels took me up, and we went eastward through the air.

The First Torment. "As we were rising from the earth to the heights of heaven, we were first met by the spirits of the first torment. Here the souls are tormented for the sins of idle speech; this is, for speaking without thinking, or speaking what is vile and shameless, or speaking without need or order. We stopped, and many scrolls were brought out on which there were recorded all the words that I had uttered from my youth on, either needlessly or unreasonably; and especially when such words expressed anything unclean or blasphemous, as young people frequently bear on their tongue.

"There I saw recorded all my angry words, foul words, worldly shameless songs, wild cries and laughter. The evil spirits accused me of all this and indicated the time and place, when and where and in whose company, I spoke these vain words or evoked the wrath of God by my unseemly words, even though at the time I did not consider such things sinful; and paying no great attention to them did not confess them to my spiritual father, and never repented. Now I kept silent, as if I had lost my voice. I was unable to reply because the evil spirits accused me rightly. But while I was silent in my shame and trembled with fear, the holy angels offered some of my good deeds and, since these were not enough, they added something from the treasure given me by the holy man Basil; and thus they paid my debts at this station.

Second Torment. "Thence we ascended and drew near the torment of lying. Here is tested every lying word: failure to keep oaths, vain use of God's name, failure to keep vows given to God, insincere or false confession of sins, and the like. The spirits of this station are evil and ruthless. They stopped us and began to question us closely. However, I was accused of two things only: first, that I occasionally lied in matters of small importance—something that I did not even consider sinful; second, that, because of a false sense of shame, I sometimes insincerely confessed my sins to my spiritual father. As for false oaths or false witness, none of these, through Christ's grace, was found in me. Here the holy angels put down for my sins some of my good deeds, but the prayers of my spiritual father did even more to save me. We went on.

Third Torment. "We reached the station where souls answer for speaking evil of others and spreading rumors about them. When we were stopped here, I understood how heavy is the sin of speaking evil about one's neighbor, and how great an evil it is to spread bad rumors, judge the deeds of others, damage someone's reputation, slander, give bad words to people, or laugh at other's deficiencies. Such sinners are regarded as Antichrists, since even before Christ has judged their neighbors they already allow themselves this right of judgment. In me, however, through the grace of Christ, they did not find much of these sins, for all the days of my life I always diligently strove not to condemn anyone, never to spread falsehoods about people, never to laugh at anyone, and never to give anyone bad words. Only occasionally, when I heard how other people condemn, malign, or laugh, did I too happen to agree with them to some extent in thought, or even, in my carelessness, add my word to what they were saying; but even then I instantly caught myself and stopped. But here I was held responsible even for the inclination. Here also the angels freed me by means of the prayers of the holy man Basil, and we continued to ascend.

Fourth Torment. "We reached the station where gluttony is punished, and evil spirits immediately rushed out to meet us, for they hoped to find a victim. Their faces resembled those of sensuous gluttons and despicable drunkards. They walked around us like dogs and immediately showed their count of all the instances when I ate secretly from others, or without need, or when I ate in the morning before I had even prayed and put on myself the sign of the cross; or when, during the holy fasts, I ate before the church service was over. They also revealed all the instances when I was drunk and even showed us those very cups, goblets, and others vessels from which I became intoxicated at such and such a time, during such and such a feast, with such and such companions. And every other instance of my gluttony was pointed out to me, and the demons already rejoiced, as if they had put their hands on me. I was trembling at the sight of such accusations and did not know how to object. But the holy angels took out enough from what was given to us by the holy man Basil, balanced my sins with this and set me free.' When the spirits saw the ransom, they cried out: 'woe! our labors and hopes have perished!' and threw their records of my gluttony into the air. I, however, rejoiced, and we went on.

"As we were ascending, the holy angels talked among themselves and said words to this effect: 'Truly does this soul have great help from Basil, a man who has pleased God. If it had not been for his prayers, she would have suffered a great deal in those stations of the air.' I took courage and said to them: 'It seems, holy angels, that none of the earth dwellers knows what happens here and what the soul can expect after death.' 'But the angels replied: 'Does not the Divine Scripture testify concerning all of this? It is read in churches and preached by priests. Only those people who are passionately devoted to the vanities of earth take no heed of what they are told, and since they consider daily gluttony and drunkenness to be the greatest pleasure, they eat beyond measure and drink without thinking of the fear of God. Their belly is their God. They have no thought of future life and do not remember what is said in the Scripture: "Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger" (Luke 6. 25).

"Still, even the gluttonous can be saved. Those of them that are merciful and kindhearted to needy and beggars and help those who ask for help—such men can easily obtain from God forgiveness of their sins, and because of their kindheartedness toward their neighbors, pass the stations of torment without stopping. It is said in the Scripture: alms save from death and cleanse every kind of sin; those who give alms and do justice will be filled with life (Tob. 12. 9). But he who does not strive to cleanse his sins by good deeds cannot escape the dark tormentors who lead the sinners down to hell and hold them bound until the terrible judgment at Christ's Second Coming. You too would not have escaped here your evil lot, were it not that you have received the treasure of holy Basil's prayers.'

Fifth Torment. "During this conversation we reached the station of sloth, where sinners are accused of all those days and hours which they spent in idleness. Here too are detained those who did not work themselves but lived by the labor of others; and those who were hired to work, took their wages, but did not fulfill the duties which they had taken upon themselves. And also are stopped here those who do not care to praise God and are too lazy to go to church on holidays and Sundays, either in the morning or to the Divine Liturgy, or to other church services. And here too people are accused of despondency and general carelessness about things that have to do with the salvation of their souls; and this happens to both laymen and those who are ordained. Many are thence led into the abyss. I too was accused there of much and could not have freed myself if the holy angels had not balanced my deficiencies by the gifts of the holy man Basil.

Sixth Torment. "Thence we came to the torment of stealing, and although we were briefly stopped there, we went on after we had given a small ransom only: for no stealing was found on my record, except some very unimportant occurrences in my childhood, and those stemmed from lack of reason.

Seventh Torment. "We passed without stopping through the station of avarice and love of money. By God's grace I never loved riches. I was content with what God gave me and never was avaricious; on the contrary, I diligently gave to the needy that which I had.

Eighth Torment. "When we rose still higher, we came to the station of usury, where those are accused who lend money for illegal interest; and here too are stopped those who gain riches by exploiting their neighbors; and those who take bribes, or by some other way stealing indirectly, acquire what really belongs to others. The tormentors, when they did not find me guilty of such sins, gnashed their teeth with annoyance, but we went on, praising God in the meanwhile.

Ninth Torment. "Now there lay before us the torment of injustice. Here are punished the unjust judges who acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent, all for the sake of gain; and also those who do not give the appointed wages to those whom they have hired, and the merchants who use false weights and measures; and all the others who are in some way or other unjust. We, however, by God's grace, passed this station without incurring any grief after we had given only a little bit for my sins in this regard.

Tenth Torment. "As for the torment of envy, we passed it without giving anything at all in payment, for I never had been envious. Here also people have to face the accusations of lack of love, hatred toward their brethren, unfriendliness, and other manifestations of hatred. Through the mercy of Christ our God, I was found innocent of all these sins; and although I saw the savagery of the demons, I no longer was afraid of them. Joyfully we went on.

Eleventh Torment. "We passed then the station of pride, where arrogant spirits make accusations of vanity, absolute reliance on oneself rather than on God, disdain of others, and bragging; and here too the souls are tormented for their failure to give proper honor to their parents, their government, or their other superiors appointed by God, and for failure to obey them. Here we put down very little for my sins, and I was free.

Twelfth Torment. "As we continued rising toward heaven, we encountered the torment of anger and ruthlessness. Happy is the man who never in his life felt anger. The eldest of the evil spirits was sitting here on a throne, and he was full of anger, ruthlessness, and pride. Ruthlessly and angrily he ordered his servants to torment and accuse me. They licked their chops like dogs and began to point out not only all those occasions when I actually said something angry or unfeeling to anyone, or harmed anyone by my words, but even those instances when I merely looked angrily at my children or punished them severely. All these cases they represented vividly and even indicated the time when everything happened, the persons on whom I poured out my anger, the very words which I then used, and in whose presence I used them. The angels replied to all this by offering part of the treasure, and we went on.

Thirteenth Torment. "After this the torment of bearing grudges lay before us. Here merciless accusations await those who nurture in their hearts evil thoughts against their neighbors and return evil for evil. God's mercy saved me here too, for I did not tend to have such wicked designs and did not use to keep in mind offences of others toward me; on the contrary, whenever I could I displayed

love and meekness toward those who offended me, and thus overcame their evil by my goodness. Here we paid nothing. Joyful in the Lord, we went on.

"Here I dared to ask my angel leaders: 'Tell me how can these terrible rulers of the air know in such detail all the evil deeds of men, and not only the open ones but even those that are secret?' The angels replied: 'Every Christian, as soon as he is baptized, receives from God an appointed guardian angel who guards him invisibly and inspires him night and day to every kind of good deed; he also records all his good deeds, for which that man later can hope to receive from the Lord grace and eternal recompense in the Heavenly Kingdom. The prince of darkness, who desires to draw into his own destruction the whole race of men as well, also appoints one of his evil spirits to walk in the man's steps and record all his evil deeds. It is his duty to inspire man to such deeds by any vile trickery in his power; and when he succeeds in his designs, he records all the wickedness of which the man has made himself guilty. Such an evil spirit spreads the report of every man's sins to all the stations of torment, and this is how the sins become known to the princes of the air. When the soul parts from its body and desires to go to its Creator in heaven, the evil spirits prevent the soul and show to it its sins. If the soul has done more good deeds than evil, they cannot keep it; but if the sins outweigh the good deeds, they keep the soul for some time, shut it up in the prison where it cannot know God, and torment it as much as God's power allows them, until that soul, by means of prayers of the Church and good deeds done for its sake by those who are still on earth, should be granted forgiveness.'

"Those who believe in the Holy Trinity and take as frequently as possible the Holy Communion of the Holy Mysteries of Christ our Saviour's Body and Blood—such people can rise to heaven directly, with no hindrances, and the holy angels defend them, and the holy saints of God pray for their salvation, since they have lived righteously. No one, however, takes care of the wicked and depraved heretics, who do nothing useful during their lives, and live in disbelief and heresy. The angels can say nothing in their defence.

"When a soul proves to be so sinful and impure before God that it has no hope of salvation, the evil spirits immediately bring it down into the abyss, where their own place of eternal torment is also. There the lost souls are kept until the time of the Lord's Second Coming. Then they will unite with their bodies and will incur torment in the fiery hell together with the devils. 'Note also,' said the angels, 'that this is the way by which only those who are enlightened by the faith and by holy baptism can rise and be tested in the stations of torment. The unbelievers do not come here. Their souls belong to hell even before they part from their bodies. When they die the devils take their souls with no need to test them. Such souls are their proper prey, and they take them down to the abyss.'

Fourteenth Torment. "During our conversation we reached the torment of murder, where are accused not only men such as robbers, but even those who have in some way wounded another man, or given him a blow, or pushed him angrily, or shoved him. We gave a little and went on.

Fifteenth Torment. "We passed the torment of magic, sorcery, poisoning, and incantations. The spirits of this station resemble serpents, snakes, and toads. They are frightening and repulsive. By the grace of God they found nothing of the kind in me, and we went on, accompanied by the shouts of the demons: 'Soon you will come to the torment of fornication; let us see how you will free yourself from it!'

"As we were rising, I dared to question the holy angels once more: 'Do all Christians pass these torments? Is there no possibility to pass by the torments and not be tested in any of the stations?' The angels replied: 'There is no other way for the souls that rise toward heaven. Every one goes this way,

but not everyone is tormented like you; only sinners like you incur the torments, for they have not confessed their sins fully, and moved by a false sense of shame, have kept their really shameful deeds secret from their spiritual fathers. When a man wholeheartedly confesses his evil deeds and repents and regrets them, his sins are invisibly wiped out by God's mercy. When a repentant soul comes here, the tormentors of the air open their books but find nothing written there; the soul, however, joyfully ascends to the throne of God.

"The evil spirits open their records but find nothing written there, for the Holy Spirit has made invisible all the writing. The spirits see this and know that what they have recorded has all been obliterated because of the soul's confession, and they are very much saddened by this. If the man is still alive when his confession has wiped out his sins, the spirits once again try to have an occasion to record some new sins of his.

"Indeed, there is a great source of salvation for man in his confession! Confession saves him from many misfortunes and much unhappiness and gives him the opportunity to pass all the torments with no hindrance and to approach God. Some people do not confess their sins because they hope to have time for salvation and for a remittance of their sins; others are simply ashamed of telling their spiritual father about their sins. They will, however, be severely tested when they pass the stations of torment. There are still other people, who are ashamed of telling everything to one spiritual father. Therefore they choose several and reveal some of their sins to one and others to another, and so on; they will be punished for this kind of confession and will suffer a great deal as they pass from one torment into another.

"If you too had made a complete confession of your sins and had been granted remission of them, and had then done all you could to make up for them by good deeds—if you had done all this, you would not have been subjected to such terrible torments in the stations. You were, however, greatly helped by the fact that you have long ago ceased to commit deadly sins and have spent the rest of your life in virtue; and especially have you been helped by the prayers of God's holy man Basil, whom you have served much and diligently.'

Sixteenth Torment. "During our conversation we approached the torment of fornication, where souls are accused not of actual fornication only but also of amorous daydreaming, of finding such thoughts sweet, of impure glances, lustful touches and passionate strokings. The prince of this torment was clothed in a dirty and stenching garment befouled by a bloody foam, and there was a multitude of demons standing around him. When they saw me they marveled that I had already 'Passed so many torments. They brought out the records of all my deeds of fornication and accused me by pointing out the persons, the places, and the times: with whom, when, and where I sinned in my youth. I kept silent and was trembling with shame and fear. The holy angels, however, said to the devils: 'Long ago has she left her deeds of fornication and has spent the remainder of her life in purity, abstinence, and fasting.' But the demons replied: 'We too know that she has long ago ceased sinning, but she has not sincerely confessed to her spiritual father and has not received from him proper directions for the satisfaction which she should do for her sins. Therefore she is ours! Either leave her to us or ransom her with good deeds.' The angels put down many of my good deeds but even more did they take from the gift given us by the holy man Basil; barely did I save myself from great grief.

Seventeenth Torment. "We reached the torment of adultery, where are accused of their sins those who are married but do not observe marital fidelity toward each other and do not keep their marriage bed undefiled; and here too rapes are punished. Besides, here are strictly punished those who have

devoted themselves to God and promised to live for Christ alone, but have fallen and failed to keep their purity. I too had a great debt here; the evil spirits already had accused me and were about to tear me from the arms of the angels, but the angels began to argue with them and show them all my later labors and good deeds. After some time they rescued me, but with difficulty, and not so much by my good deeds, all of which, down to the last, they deposited here—but rather by the treasure of my father Basil, from which they also took very much to put on the scale to balance my iniquities. Then they took me and we went on.

Eighteenth Torment. "We approached the station of the Sodomitic sins; here souls are Accused of all unnatural sins, incests, and others revolting deeds performed in secret, shameful and frightening even to think about. The prince of this torment was more disgusting than any other devil; he was befouled by pus and full of stench. His servants were similar to him. The stench that came from them was not to be endured, their ugliness was unimaginable, their cruelty and ruthlessness not to be expressed. They surrounded us but by the grace of God found nothing in me and ran away from us in their shame. We, however, went on.

"The holy angels said to me: 'You have seen, Theodora, the frightening and disgusting torments of fornication! Know then that few are the souls that pass them without stopping and paying their ransom; for the whole world lies immersed in the evils of seductive foulness, and all mankind is sensuous. Few guard against the impurities of fornication and deaden the desire of their own flesh. And this is the reason why few pass here freely; many come as far as this place but perish here. The rulers of the torments of fornication boast that they more than any of the others fill the fiery abyss of hell with the souls of men. But you, Theodora, must thank God that you have already passed the torments of fornication by the prayers of the holy man Basil, your father. Now you will no longer fear.'

Nineteenth Torment. "Thereafter we came to the torment of heresies, where are punished those reasonings about faith which are not right, and also turning away from the Orthodox confession of faith, and lack of faith, doubts about it, denial of holy things or a negative attitude toward them, and other sins of the kind. I passed this torment without being tested; we were no longer far from the gates of Heaven.

Twentieth Torment. "But here we were met by the evil spirits of the last torment, the station that tests lack of compassion and cruelty of heart. Cruel are the tormentors of this place, and their prince is terrible, and dried-up and depressed is his appearance. Here the souls of the unmerciful are tormented without mercy. Even if a man performs the most outstanding deeds, mortifies himself by fasting, prays ceaselessly, and guards and keeps the purity of his body, but is merciless from this station he is cast down into the abyss of hell and will receive no mercy in all eternity. We, however, by the grace of Christ, passed this place without trouble, for we were helped by the prayers of the holy man Basil.

"Now we approached the gates of Heaven. We entered joyfully, for we had passed unharmed through the bitter tests of the torments. The gates resembled crystal, and the buildings that stood there glistened like stars. The youths who stood there were wearing golden garments. They joyfully received us, for they saw that a soul had escaped from the bitter tests of the torments of the air.

"As we were walking in heaven, joyful and glad to be saved, the water that was above the earth parted, and, then it closed again behind us. We came to a very awesome place where there were very

beautiful youths in fiery garments. They saw the angels carrying me and met us with joy at the salvation of my soul for the kingdom of God. They went together with us and sang the Divine Song.

"As we continued walking, a cloud descended on us, and then another cloud; and when we had gone somewhat farther, we saw an inexplicable height on which was the throne of God; it was very white and enlightened all who stood before it. Around it stood very beautiful youths clothed in red and shining. Why should I, my child Gregory, tell you about it? There are things that cannot be either understood or explained. Reason is clouded by incapacity to understand fully, and memory vanishes there; I forgot where I was.

"The holy angels who had brought me there led me to the throne of God, and here I bowed before the Unseen God; and then I heard a voice which said: 'Go with her and show her all the souls of the blessed and of the sinners, all the dwellings of the saints that are in Paradise, and the dwellings in the nether regions of hell; then grant her rest wherever my follower Basil will indicate.'

"We went on a road unknown to me and came to the dwellings of the saints. What shall I say about them? I am in confusion. There are various chambers arranged artfully and beautifully. Of course they are created by God's hand and are what the Scripture calls 'the cool place, the fruitful place, the place of rest.'

"When I saw all this I marveled and was very joyous and happily looked at everything. A holy angel who was showing these things to me explained: 'This is the abode of the Apostles; that one—of the prophets and other martyrs; those others of the holy bishops, holy monks, and the holy righteous.' All these were in their breadth and length like a king's city.

"When we entered and found ourselves inside these lovely dwellings, the saints met us and kissed us in spirit and rejoiced in my salvation. Then they took me to the abode of the patriarch Abraham and showed me everything that was there. Everything was full of glory and of spiritual joy; of fragrant flowers, myrrh, and sweet odors.

"There were various chambers, which are made and upheld by God's Spirit alone. We saw there a multitude of infants who were happy and rejoicing. I asked my angel leaders: 'Who are these infants gathered here, bathed in light, rejoicing around this holy old man?' The angels replied that this was the patriarch Abraham, and that the multitude was composed of Christian infants.

"Then we went to see the surroundings of Paradise; but their beauty simply cannot be described. If I should begin to tell all that I saw and heard there, I should be filled with fear and trembling.

"Then I was led into the nether reaches of hell, where the Lord has bound and imprisoned Satan. There I saw frightening torments. Thence they led me westward, and there too I saw similar horrible torments, ready for sinners. As the angels showed all this to me, they said: 'Do you see from what misfortunes you have been saved by the prayers of the holy man?'

"The sinners in their horrible torments were shrieking and begging for mercy. I saw torments of such a kind that it is excruciating even to tell about them.

"When we had passed and examined all this, one of the angels who, accompanied me said: 'You know, Theodora, that in the world there is the custom to remember the dead on the fortieth day after their death; today the holy man Basil remembers you on earth in his prayers.'

"Yes, my spiritual child Gregory, forty days have now passed since the time when my soul parted from my body, and I am in the place which is ready also for our holy father Basil. You are still in the world, and so is holy Basil, but he shows the way of truth to all who come to him, and by compelling them to repent he makes many turn to the Lord.

"Come with me. We shall enter my inner chamber and you will look at it. Not long before you came, the holy man Basil was also here."

I went after her and we entered together. As we were walking along I saw that her garments were as white as snow.

We entered a palace decorated with gold. In its midst there were various trees that bore splendid fruit. When I looked east I saw luxurious halls, light and high. There was a large table on which stood golden vessels; they looked very expensive and were wondrous to look at. In the vessels were vegetables of all sorts, and fragrance issued from them.

The holy man Basil was there, sitting on a marvelous throne. Near the table there stood people, but they were unlike those who live on earth and have bodies: they were surrounded as if by the rays of the sun, but they still looked human.

As they ate the food that was on the table, the amount of the food became replenished of itself. Beautiful youths were serving them. When any of those who were at the table wished to drink, he poured a liquid into his mouth and experienced a spiritual sweetness. They spent long hours at this table. The youths who were serving them were girded with golden belts, and on their heads were crowns made from a precious stone.

Theodora approached the holy man and begged him for me. The holy man looked at me and joyfully called me to himself. I approached and bowed before him to the ground, as was our custom. He quietly told me: "God will be merciful to you and forgive you, my child! He is the All-merciful; He will reward you with all the heavenly goods." He lifted me from the ground and continued: "Here is Theodora. You very much wished to see her and asked me for this so intently: now you do see her, and you see where she is and of what destiny her soul has been found worthy in this our life beyond death. Look at her well."

Theodora looked at me and said: "My brother Gregory! Because you thought about me humbly, the merciful Lord has fulfilled your wish through the prayer of our father, the holy man Basil."

The holy man turned to Theodora and said: "Go with him and show him my garden. Let him see its beauty." She took me by my right hand and brought me to a wall in which there was a golden gate. After she had opened the gate, she led me inside the garden. There I saw trees of a marvelous beauty. Their leaves were golden, they were full of flowers and emitted an unusually pleasant fragrance.

There was a countless number of such lovely trees. Their branches were bowed to the ground because of the weight of the fruit. All this astonished me. Theodora turned toward me and asked: "Why do you wonder? How much would you marvel if you saw the garden called Paradise, which the Lord Himself planted in the East!? You would be astonished at its greatness and beauty. As compared to it, this garden is nothing."

I begged Theodora to tell me who had planted this garden, for I had never seen anything like it. She replied that it was obvious that I never had, for I was still living on earth; here, however, everything was other than earthly, and the life led here was other than earthly.

"God grants such dwellings in the life beyond death, but only to those who have led a life full of labors and sweat, such as the life of our holy father Basil has been from his youth to his deep old age. Such dwellings are granted to those who pray zealously and deny their desires, as he has done when he slept on bare ground, endured intense heat and frost, ate on occasion nothing except grass. This is the kind of life which he has led before he came to Constantinople, but this life was a source of salvation to himself, and through him, to many others. This kind of life, and prayers of holy men like Basil, enable the departed to enter the abodes of the blessed.

"He who during his earthly life endures many griefs and misfortunes; he who strictly keeps the Lord's commandments and does not swerve from them—he receives his reward and his comfort in the life beyond death. The holy author of the Psalms, David, said about the difficult life on earth that pleases God: 'Eat of the fruit of your labors'."

When Theodora told me that life in heaven is different from life on earth, I could not help touching myself, for I seemed eager to know if I was still in the flesh; as of course I was. My feelings and thoughts were pure, and my spirit rejoiced in all that I had seen. I wished to return to the palace by the same gate through which I had entered. When, however, I had returned to the palace, I no longer found anyone at the table.

I bowed to Theodora and returned home; and at that very moment I awoke and thought to myself: where have I been and what was all that which I have seen and heard?

I rose from my bed and went to the holy Basil in order to learn from him whether my vision was from God or from the devils. When I came to him, I, according to our custom, bowed to the ground. He blessed me, bade me to sit near him and asked me: "Do you know, my child, where you were this night?"

I pretended to know nothing and replied: "My father, I have been nowhere; I was sleeping on my bed." The holy man said: "This is true. Your body actually was asleep on your bed, but your spirit was elsewhere, and you still know everything that was revealed to you this night.

"You have seen Theodora. When you approached the gates of the heavenly kingdom, she met you joyfully, led you inside the house, showed you everything, told you about her death and about all the torments that she had passed.

"Was it not at my bidding that you went into the court where you saw a marvelous table and its wondrous arrangement? Did you not see the vegetables placed there, and did you not recognize their sweetness and see the flowers, and what the feasters drank, and what youths were serving them?"

"Did you not stand still and look at the beauty of those halls? When I came, did I not tell you to look at Theodora, since you had so much wished to see her and learn from her how she had been rewarded for her saintly life?"

"Did she then not lead you at my bidding within the sacred enclosure? Did you not see all this in your vision this night?"

"How is it then that you are saying that you have seen nothing?"

When I heard the saint saying all this, I no longer doubted that this was no delusion, no dream, but an actual vision sent to me by the Lord God.

I said to myself: how great must this holy man be before God! He himself was there in both his body and his soul, and now he knows all that I have seen and heard there! My eyes filled with tears and I said: "It is true, my holy father; everything was such as you have said. I thank the Lover of Men, the Lord our God Jesus Christ, Who has granted it to me to see all this and has put it in my thoughts to take recourse to you, so that I can constantly be under the protection of your prayers and can be filled with the sweetness of my vision, in which such great marvels have been revealed to me."

The saint said to me: "If, my child Gregory, you will complete your earthly journey rightly and will not swerve from the Divine commandments, the evil spirits of the torments in the air will be unable after your death to harm you; you have heard this from Theodora: you will pass the stations of torment and will be blessed. Joyfully will you be met where you have been this night and have seen Theodora; and where I, sinner that I am, also hope to be admitted to the abode which you have seen; for I place my hope upon Christ, Who has promised to give His grace to me.

"Listen, my child, to what I am saying to you, but keep the secret of your father. I wish to die before you, and you will follow me after a long time, when you will have perfected yourself in good works. This has been revealed to me by the Lord.

"Keep secret all that I have told you, while I am alive; let no one find out anything of what you have heard.

"When I am dead, if you should wish to undertake the labor and not to leave my humble life without remembrance, describe it as it is customary to describe the lives of those who have exerted themselves in virtue.

"Describe, that is, not so much my life as that divine grace which has led and strengthened me throughout my entire life, and give me the ability to perform not only good deeds but even miracles.

"Represent all that you seen and heard, and let it benefit those who will read or listen to your account. But be careful to state, first of all, that the Lord, when He so deigns, helps any man to do great wonders; and tell everything about these wonders witnessed by you, so that those who will learn about them from you may praise God, Who is generous with what is good.

"Beware of the traps of the evil one at all times of day and night until the Lord should call you." All this and many other things did the holy man tell me. Then he prayed and dismissed me. (*Lives of the Saints* for March 26th).

From **Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave**, compiled by Archimandrite Panteleimon (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Monastery, 1996 [1968]), pp. 69-87.

For more information on the Orthodox Church, please contact:

St. Vladimir Orthodox Church
Ann Arbor, MI
(734) 475-4590
www.stvladimiraami.org
stvladimir@usa.net