

# DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER!

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Everyone who will be in Paradise will be a believing Orthodox Christian.

It is with this understanding that the article "Awake, Sleeper" quotes the *Hymns of Paradise* by Saint Ephraim the Syrian and his teaching on the degrees of perfection.

The question is: when and how did they become believing Orthodox Christians?

What does our sacred literature say about this?

Before touching on this, it might be of interest to us to know that recently, the Lutheran newspaper, *Christian News* (Dec. 14, 2009), had an article about "universalism". The article used the term in the exact same sense that I use it: the false teaching that all men will be saved, *no matter what they believe*.

This is not an Orthodox Christian teaching, and none of our Church Fathers espoused this doctrine.

One way to argue a point is to put words into your opponent's mouth. For example, some have tried to imply that my article, "Awake, Sleeper!" teaches that all men will be saved, or that there is salvation outside of the Church. But neither I, nor any of the Saints that I quoted, teach any such thing anywhere. Instead, what I found was that the Holy Scriptures and our Saints teach that all men will be given *an opportunity* to accept or reject the Gospel of Christ. This is very different.

Perhaps it would be useful here to repeat some of what I found in our sacred writings, just to refresh our memory.

The Holy Scriptures teach us that, after His Passion, our Saviour descended into Hades to preach to the souls held in bondage there.

What does the Dismissal Hymn of Saint John the Forerunner say about this? Here is the text:

The memory of the just is celebrated with hymns of praise, but the Lord's testimony is sufficient for thee, O Forerunner; for thou hast proved to be truly even more venerable than the Prophets, since thou wast granted to baptize in the running waters Him Whom they proclaimed. Wherefore having contested for the truth, *thou didst rejoice to announce the good tidings even to those in Hades: that God hath appeared in the flesh, taking away the sin of the world and granting us great mercy.*

Every Orthodox Christian already knows that "God hath appeared in the flesh and taken away the sin of the world," so what's the point of preaching this to those who already know?

In the *Octoëchos* we read the following:

O Lord, King of the ages and Creator of all, Thou didst accept crucifixion and burial in the flesh for us, *that Thou mightiest free us all from Hades*. Thou art our God; beside Thee we know none other.

And also:

...And crying out to the stout-hearted myrrh-bearing women, [the angel] said: Do ye not see the lifelessness of the guards, the loosing of the seals, *and the emptying of Hades*.

(*Sunday Matins Praises, Plagal of First Tone*)

When we read and chant these words in Church, we should have certain things in mind:

1. Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston did not compose these hymns.
2. These hymns have been in the Orthodox Church's *Octoëchos* for centuries — *many, many* centuries.
3. Millions and millions of pious Orthodox Christian monastics and laypeople have chanted these hymns over and over again, and not one of them, to my knowledge, was ever accused of being a "universalist," or of teaching that there is salvation outside of the Church.
4. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* — "The law of prayer is the law of belief."
5. These hymns were composed by Saint John of Damascus, who also wrote the following:

Some say that [Christ delivered from Hades] only those  
who believed,  
Such as fathers and prophets,  
Judges and, with them, kings and rulers,  
and others of the Hebrew people,  
not numerous or known to many.

But we shall reply to those who think this  
that there is nothing marvelous or strange  
in Christ saving those who had believed;  
for He alone is the just Judge,  
and everyone who believes in Him shall not perish.

Wherefore, they all ought to have been saved  
and delivered from the bonds of Hades  
by the descent of our God and Master;  
for this very thing came to pass by His foresight.

Whereas those who were saved only by His *philanthropía* [love for mankind]  
were, I think, all those  
who had the purest life,  
and performed all manner of good works  
living in modesty, temperance  
yet, they had not grasped [or, apprehended — *Gr. katélavon*]

the pure and divine Faith,  
because they had not been instructed in it,  
and remained altogether untutored.

They were those whom the Steward and Master of all  
drew and captured in His divine nets,  
and persuaded to believe in Him,  
illuminating them with His divine rays  
and showing them the True Light.

*(Concerning Those Who Died in Faith, St. John of Damascus, PG. 95, 257 AC)*

In Saint John of Damascus' Dismissal Hymn, we chant:

Guide of Orthodoxy, teacher of piety and holiness, luminary of the world, God-  
inspired adornment of monastics, O wise John, by thy teaching thou hast  
enlightened all, O harp of the Spirit. Intercede with Christ God that our souls be  
saved.

So please don't shoot the messenger! I'm only the messenger boy, and I'm in good company.

When I find more in our sacred texts about this subject, you'll hear about it.