

## Thanatology: Patristic Views on Death

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**Abstract:** The church fathers, both ante-Nicene and post-Nicene, held to views on death and the afterlife which were at times in strong agreement, sometimes at variance with one another, and also, at times, influenced by Platonism. The end “goal” was to be in the presence of Jesus Christ for eternity, the path being physical death and prepared by, for some of the fathers, divesting self of anything worldly, such as wealth and possessions. This paper surveys selected church fathers and works to present a basic view of how the early church approached death and the afterlife.

**Martyrdom.** Death was well known among the early church fathers, not so much as an academic theological exercise, but rather for many an almost sure expectation as a martyr when the Imperial Roman government demanded homage to the emperor, something to which the believers could not submit. It was, in a very real sense, a clash between deities; the Romans felt their existence and mission was ordained by their gods, that they had a divine duty to conquer and to civilize barbarian peoples; they felt their rule was just and needful to create a new humanity.<sup>1</sup> The clash with Christianity is obvious; the Church felt there was only one King, and He was not anything to do with the Roman pantheon, and the only way to forge a “new humanity” was through submission to their King.

The classical creeds of Christendom opened with a declaration of belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth. The monotheistic idea, grounded in the

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<sup>1</sup> David Nystrom, “We Have No King But Caesar: Roman Imperial Ideology and the Imperial Cult”, in Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 24.

religion of Israel, loomed large in the minds of the earliest fathers; though not reflective theologians, they were fully conscious that it marked the dividing line between the Church and paganism.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of Jewish monotheism, a strong reality throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Exodus 20:3, Isaiah 42:8, 42:17, 45:20), with its foundation in Genesis 1,<sup>3</sup> had no small effect on the early church. In *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, the writer at length discusses the vanity of idols, rhetorically asking, “Are they not all deaf? Are they not blind? Are they not without life? Are they not destitute of feeling? Are they not incapable of motion?”<sup>4</sup> all of which reflect particularly Isaianic influences (e.g., Isaiah 44:6-20). For the church fathers, there was but one God, manifested in His Son, Jesus Christ, and any other claimants to deity, including the emperor or the pantheon of Rome, were all false witnesses. For them, as for the Old Testament prophets, God ruled the nations, a rejection of the “ancient henotheistic and polytheistic attitudes” of Israel’s neighbors,<sup>5</sup> a rejection which continued in the Church of Roman and Greek religion. In his defense of the Christian faith, written to the Roman emperors Antoninus and Commodus, Athenagoras is immovable in his defense of the God of the Scriptures, a completely monotheistic revelation.

That we are not atheists, therefore, seeing that acknowledge one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason, who is encompassed by light, and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable, by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), 83.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis”, *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed.) (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Diog.* II, ANF, I:25.

<sup>5</sup> Paul R. House, “Obadiah” in Vanhoozer, *Theological Interpretation*, 265.

set in order, and is kept in being - I have sufficiently demonstrated.<sup>6</sup>

It is this God, the one and only God, for whom the early church was prepared to give up their lives, and on many occasions, did so. Phileas, bishop of Thmuis, when given opportunity to recant by offering sacrifice to the emperor, was firm in replying, "I have thought it over, often, and that is what I choose", meaning martyrdom in loyalty to Christ over apostasy in a sacrifice to the emperor.<sup>7</sup> Tertullian (160-240) penned a strong word of exhortation and encouragement to the burgeoning number of martyrs in the Church. He encouraged those facing martyrdom to "give all endeavor...to retain" Jesus, "so let Him lead you thence to your Lord."<sup>8</sup> He felt martyrdom was a means of trampling the devil's throat "by courage", bringing more than an escape but also a vanquishing of the enemy.<sup>9</sup> He wrote about the "good to be got from martyrdom", the usefulness and the duty of it coming from learning of the necessity for it.<sup>10</sup> Tertullian is also thought to have been the editor of a story about the martyrdom of two young mothers, Perpetua, a married woman of means, who gave birth in the catacombs of the Roman Colosseum, and Felicitas, her maid.<sup>11</sup> Perpetua's deep faith was such that, despite continual entreaties by her weeping father, who took custody her infant son, she did not waver at all in her faith nor in her determination to never deny Jesus Christ as Savior. Although severely wounded in the arena by a sword through her ribs, she guided across her throat the sword of the young gladiator sent to kill her. Of her Tertullian wrote, "Possibly such a woman could not have been

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<sup>6</sup> *Leg. X*, ANF, II:133

<sup>7</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 233-235.

<sup>8</sup> *Ad. I*, ANF, III:693.

<sup>9</sup> *Scorp. VI*, ANF, III:638.

<sup>10</sup> *Scorp. II*, ANF, III:634.

<sup>11</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, "Appendix: The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas", ANF, III:697.

slain unless she herself had willed it, because she was feared by the impure spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Polycarp, who is thought to have been a disciple of John, one of the original apostles,<sup>13</sup> was martyred at age 86. Owing to his age, the Roman authorities gave him every opportunity to recant and be spared execution. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (130-200 A. D.), gathered together and edited some apparently eyewitness recollections of Polycarp’s death.

As the governor, however, continued to urge him, and said, “Swear, and I will dismiss you. Revile Christ”. Polycarp replied, “Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?” The governor still continuing to urge him, and again saying, “Swear by the genius of Cesar,” said Polycarp, “If you are so vain as to think that I should swear by the genius of Cesar, as you say, pretending not to know who I am, hear my free confession. I am a Christian. But if you wish to learn what the doctrine of Christianity is, grant me a day and listen to me.” The Proconsul said, “Persuade the people.” Polycarp replied, “I have thought proper to give you a reason; for we have been taught to give magistrates and powers appointed by God, the honour that is due to them, as far as it does not injure us; but I do not consider those the proper ones before whom I should deliver my defence.” The Proconsul said, “I have wild beasts at hand, I will cast you to these unless you change your mind.” He answered, “Call them. For we have no reason to repent from the better to the worse, but it is good to change from wickedness to virtue.” He again urged him. “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, should you despise the beasts, and not change your mind.”

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<sup>12</sup> *Mart. Perp. et Fel.*, ANF, III:705.

<sup>13</sup> *Praescr.* 32, ANF III:258.

Polycarp answered, “You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring what you wish.” Saying these, and many other similar declarations, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was brightened with grace.<sup>14</sup>

The examples could be multiplied, but for the present the examples given should suffice as evidence of the early church’s general lack of fear of death for the sake of serving Christ. Martyrdom was seen as service to the Father as well as obedience to His will, as a consequence of service to God. Irenaeus wrote:

And indeed the prophets, along with other things which they predicted, also foretold this, that all those on whom the Spirit of God should rest, and would obey the word of the Father, and serve Him according to their ability, should suffer persecutions, and be stoned and slain.<sup>15</sup>

The *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, a series of eight books compiled between 375 and 380 A.D., an early encyclopedia of writings on the Christian life, on worship and on the operation of the church, addressed to both the clergy and the laity, expressed a strong exhortation for those not facing martyrdom to be very dedicated in their care and support of those who were to die a martyr’s death, even to the point of selling all one had in order to buy a condemned person out of prison, an act which would render a person “worthy of God”.<sup>16</sup>

A general lack of fear should not be necessarily read as a commendation of death; the early church rightly understood

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<sup>14</sup> Anon., *The Martyrdom of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna* (Lexington, KY: J. Clarke & Co., 1835), 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> *Haer.* 33:10, ANF, I:509.

<sup>16</sup> *Const. Ap.* V:1, ANF, VII:437.

death as that which brings destruction on the whole of creation. But neither were they afraid of death; Christ, their life, was their “most precious possession” that not even the grimness of death could take away from them.<sup>17</sup> Suffering was never minimized, and neither is there any attempt to doubt the promises of God.

There was, however, a strong sentiment against grieving those who had died “in the Lord”, that is, believers at the time of their death. Tertullian argued that since the resurrection of believers is a certainty, “grief for death is needless”, for “why should you bear impatiently the withdrawal of him who believe will return.” Believers should not lament those who have died, but could properly be longed for.<sup>18</sup> Commodianus (c. 240 AD) insisted it was not right for believers to either wear black clothing in mourning or to outwardly grieve the departed; he said the Lord taught grief should be with the mind, not with the outward display.<sup>19</sup>

Cyprian, regarded as one of the great early theologians of the church,<sup>20</sup> wrote that those who fear death are those who have not been saved, who are to be “delivered over to the fires of Gehenna”.<sup>21</sup> Believers themselves should never fear death since by faith they are Christ’s.

For it is written that the just lives by faith. If you are just, and live by faith, if you truly believe in Christ, why, since you are about to be with Christ, and are secure of the Lord’s promise, do you not embrace the assurance that you are called to Christ, and rejoice that you are freed from the devil?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Toby Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait of Death as the Qualifier of Both the Ethic and Value of Human Life*. (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation; Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 232-233.

<sup>18</sup> *Pat.* 9, ANF, III:713.

<sup>19</sup> *Instr.* 73, ANF, IV:217.

<sup>20</sup> “Cyprian”, *CBTEL*, I:624.

<sup>21</sup> *Mort.* 14, ANF, V:472.

<sup>22</sup> *Mort.* 3, ANF, V:470.

**The intermediate state.** New Testament revelation concerning the immediate afterlife changed how people viewed the eventuality of death. Instead of the often “spooky” scenes of the afterlife in Old Testament literature, Christians understood that since they were no longer under condemnation (Romans 8:1-2), then they were no longer under the specter of judgment (1 John 4:17-18). Those who are in Christ are in relationship with the One who came “to destroy the works of him who had the power of death (cf. 1 John 3:8).”<sup>23</sup>

It has been argued the position of the early Church on the afterlife depended on how “man” was viewed.

...it was increasingly held that each soul would face a judgement immediately after death, at which appropriate rewards and punishments would be determined, which the soul then received, prior to the resurrection and the “last judgement.” This view was based on the growing prominence of an instrumentalist anthropological model in which the body was considered merely the instrument for carrying out the desires of the soul, and thus the soul could legitimately face the judgement alone, apart from the resurrection of the body. While the idea of a general judgement on the Last Day was maintained, the immediate individual judgement eventually assumed priority, and thus the former became increasingly problematic as it appeared to serve no real purpose: the fate of the soul was known from its judgement at death, and a general judgement at the end of the age could only confirm the decision already passed. Thus the implications of these two models in eschatology are significant, as the first focuses on the resurrection as the true commencement of eschatological life, while the second makes possible the entry of the soul into eschatological life immediately after death and

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<sup>23</sup> Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 228.

independently of the resurrection of the body.<sup>24</sup>

In either of the just mentioned anthropological models, how did the church fathers view the application of such Scriptures as Luke 23:43 and 2 Corinthians 5:8? In the Lukan account, the penitent thief on the cross is promised Paradise that very day. To the Corinthians, Paul said being away from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Justin Martyr taught the soul left the body at the time of death.<sup>25</sup> At the time of God's choosing, the body would then be raised "perfect and entire".<sup>26</sup> The soul would be in the presence of Jesus, as the Scripture teaches, while the body would wait for the resurrection, when that which is perishable would be raised imperishable (1 Corinthians 15:42, 52).

Tertullian, conversely, held that no soul would go to be with Jesus until "the archangel's trumpet", and that the "sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood in the pains of martyrdom"; otherwise, "every soul is detained in safe keeping in Hades until the day of the Lord."<sup>27</sup> While conservative modern theological thought argues that the Christian's soul, immediately upon death, is in the "presence of God with rejoicing",<sup>28</sup> some believe, based on Irenaeus' work, that the church father held to a much different thought.

Since Irenaeus, following Scripture, found no room in his doctrine for an immediate entry into heaven for the Christian at the crisis of death, he was compelled to posit an intermediate state to occupy

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher John Gousmett, *Shall the Body Strive and Not Be Crowned? Unitary and Instrumentalist Anthropological Models As Keys to Interpreting the Structure of Patristic Eschatology* (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, April 14, 1993), 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Jus. De Res X*, ANF, I:298.

<sup>26</sup> *Just. De Res IV*, ANF, I:295.

<sup>27</sup> *An. 55*, ANF, III:231.

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan and Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1994), 816.

the interval. Christ Himself observed the law of the dead in that, after having expired on the Cross, He did not go straight to heaven. He descended into Hades, and only on the third day did He rise again. Then for the space of forty days He visited the apostles before finally ascending to the Father. In the same manner, the souls of those who trust in Him go at death to an invisible place determined by God and there sojourn whilst they await the resurrection. At the Parousia they are reunited with their bodies and go into the presence of God. The disciple is not greater than his Lord. The delay to which Christ consented is imposed on us.<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile 2 Corinthians 5:8 with the ideas of some of the church fathers - particularly Irenaeus - that the righteous who die do not go immediately into the presence of the Lord. It is puzzling how Irenaeus, who was a very careful theologian and scholar, would take the position he did after (surely) reading what Paul had written. It appears, however, that Tertullian had much the same view as Irenaeus. He wrote the souls of the (Old Testament) patriarchs are in Hades, awaiting resurrection, in company with all souls, who are in anticipation of their final bliss (or, punishment).<sup>30</sup>

As to 2 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul used the metaphor “at home” twice in that chapter. The first is in verse 6; to be “home in the body” is to be “away from the Lord.” Then, in verse 8, he says to be away from the body is to be “home with the Lord.” The “picture” Paul wants his readers to see is departure from the physical existence means immediate presence with the

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<sup>29</sup> A. Skevington Wood, “The Eschatology of Irenaeus”, *EvQ* 41:1 (January-March 1969), 34-35.

<sup>30</sup> Gousmett, *Shall the Body Strive*, 62.

Lord, “in a new dimension that is qualitatively different from our (present) experience of the Lord’s presence in this world”.<sup>31</sup>

Paul never spoke of the believer post-mortem spending time in Hades, or Paradise or any other locale other than “with the Lord.” Thomas C. Oden argued the Scriptures “portrays believers as engaged in a conscious life in dialogue, in communion with God immediately after death”; the language of “sleep” as metaphor applied to death is “analogy...not to be applied literally.”<sup>32</sup>

The consciousness of the dead in the afterlife is a topic generating much in the way of debate. Against Oden’s view are two 19th century theologians arguing for “sleep in death.” Henry C. Constable’s 1873 work on death insisted on the “sleep-death” connection.

It makes no nice distinctions such as our Platonic divines so constantly make. It never says that the soul is alive, and awake, while the body is asleep. From language such as exposes Christian theologians to the ridicule, open or concealed, of men who have studied the physiology of man, the New Testament is wholly free. It simply says that man — whatever man is — sleeps in death. The absurd contradictions of our Platonic divines, that man is in the grave and in heaven at the same time, that he is dead and alive, asleep and awake, the New Testament knows nothing of.<sup>33</sup>

Another 19th century theologian, Herbert Mortimer Luckock, based his view of the intermediate state of the believer on Jesus’

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<sup>31</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (NAC 29) (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishers, 1999), 265. “Death will usher the believer into the presence of the Lord” - Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40) (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 112.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit* (Systematic Theology, Volume 3) (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), 396.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Constable, *Hades or the Intermediate State of Man* (London: Elliot Stock, 1873), 98.

words in John 20:17, saying Jesus, after His death, did not go into the presence of His Father, and that the soul's immediate post-mortem destination is neither heaven nor hell.<sup>34</sup>

However, those who argue the believer's soul after death does not go immediately into the presence of Jesus, even though they advance certain Scriptures to substantiate their position, fail to adequately consider Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 5. If the believer is home in the body — that is, alive on earth — then the believer is away from — not in the immediate presence of — the Lord Jesus. If the believer is away from the body — that is, having died on earth — then that believer is home with — in the immediate presence — of Christ.

It has been argued Paul's position on the afterlife shifted, that he originally held to the "sleep-in-death" position, only to later change to that reflected in 2 Corinthians 5.

In his earlier epistles, Paul seems to have described this state as one of 'sleep', thus an unconscious intermediate state. Christ will return to raise sleeping, unconscious believers to life again. This appears to be reflected in verses such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 15 ('concerning those who have fallen asleep in Christ'); 5:10 ('whether we are awake or asleep') and 1 Corinthians 15:18, 20, 51.

However, two sets of verses in Paul's later letters seem to give rather a different picture of the apostle's view of the intermediate state: 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 ('away from the body and at home with the Lord') and Philippians 1:21-23 ('to die is gain ... to depart and to be with Christ'). These verses seem to indicate that when believers die, they go immediately into the presence of Christ without there being any state of

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<sup>34</sup> Henry Mortimer Luckcok, *The Intermediate State Between Death and Judgment* (London, New York and Bombay: Long, Green, 1896), 19.

unconsciousness or 'sleep' at all.<sup>35</sup>

The question then is the intent of the term “sleep” when Paul uses it in connection with believers who have died. It is possible, and plausible, Paul did not have a state of unconsciousness in mind.

One issue to be explored is the meaning of the term 'sleep' as used in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:10 and 1 Corinthians 15:18, 20, 51. It could well be argued that this could be understood as a euphemism for death rather than as referring to a state of unconsciousness. A survey of OT, Intertestamental literature and Rabbinic writings indicates that the word 'sleep' was used in two main ways: to relate the certainty of resurrection which was portrayed as a waking from sleep, and also simply to describe the dead with no thought of resurrection in view. This being the case, it would seem hazardous to deduce anything so specific as 'unconsciousness' from the use of 'sleep' for death.<sup>36</sup>

Paul's use of “sleep” was a common euphemistic term for death.<sup>37</sup> Some of the ancient cultures in the ANE did not have a developed system of the afterlife, “but simply drew the obvious analogy between the states of sleep and death.” The verb Paul uses, *koimaō*, does not insist on a state from which someone needs to be awakened, “nor does it say anything about the present condition of the dead.”<sup>38</sup>

I contend using the example of Jesus, as did Luckcok and as do some of the church fathers to maintain a post-mortem existence of other than being in the immediate presence of the

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Woodbridge, “Did Paul Change His Mind? An Examination of Some Pauline Eschatology”, *Themelios* 28.3 (Summer 2003), 6-7.

<sup>36</sup> Woodbridge, “Did Paul Change His Mind?”, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 105.

<sup>38</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC) (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 119.

Lord, fails to properly evaluate Paul's statements. Further, the resurrection of the believing dead is, as Murray J. Harris argued, is "not the reanimation of corpses but the transformation of the whole person into the image of Christ by the power of the indwelling Spirit, in spite of the intervention of death."<sup>39</sup>

Among the church fathers, "Paradise" figured significantly as to the intermediate state. Tertullian seemed to hold that Paradise was reserved only for the martyrs, drawing from the vision Perpetua, as she was dying, received of martyrs under the altar of God.<sup>40</sup> He believed Paradise was part of Hades, but was significantly superior to and more glorious. It was opened to martyrs and others who would be considered "greater saints" when Jesus descended into the place of the dead.

Clement of Alexandria and Origen appear to have been the first to admit all the saints, and not just the martyrs, to Paradise prior to the final resurrection. Through his descent into Hades Christ destroyed the dominion of the devil over humanity, and led the OT saints into Paradise, having opened its gates through his atoning death. Those who subsequently die no longer need wait in Hades (which has been closed by Christ's victory and descent) but can go directly to Paradise.<sup>41</sup>

Methodius (died c. 311), bishop of Lycia, commented on Origen's idea that Paradise was separate from heaven, asserting Paul's reference to the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2-3) is not a reference to Paradise.<sup>42</sup> Apparently Origen believed Paradise was a place where existence was incorporeal.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Murray J. Harris, "Resurrection and Immortality: Eight Theses", *Themelios* 1.2 (Spring 1976), 51.

<sup>40</sup> *An.* 55, ANF III:231.

<sup>41</sup> Gousmett, *Shall the Body Strive*, 60.

<sup>42</sup> *Res.* 3:9, ANF VI:370.

<sup>43</sup> *Res.* 3:9, ANF VI:370.

During the on-going life of the Church, there were those who taught that in the post-mortem state, believers will enjoy meat and drink, because such was part of the original Paradise, and it would be to paradise that believers would return.<sup>44</sup> Gregory (331-395 A.D.), bishop of Nyssa, objected strongly to earthly food being part of the heavenly afterlife, even in paradise. He believed the “food” in the afterlife would be “the hearing of the word of the Lord.”<sup>45</sup> He could not conceive of earthly food in the eschaton, insisting believers would receive the wisdom of God symbolized by the tree of life.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the criticism of some of the church fathers<sup>47</sup> and of modern theologians such as Constable of a Platonic incursion dividing the body into different entities, the language of Scripture, and particularly of the apostle Paul speaks of the animate soul being immediately in the presence of the Lord Jesus at the time of death, leaving in now inanimate body behind until the time of the resurrection of the righteous.

Body and soul may be understood the way Platonic or Cartesian dualism defines them - as essentially distinct substances that are temporally co-dependent only by necessity...but where the soul longs to be free from the prison of the body.... Biblical dualism presents the real possibility of the continued existence of the soul despite it being separated from the body. The righteous soul will continue after death in conscious fellowship with Christ in an intermediate state while it awaits the general resurrection. The identity of the individual who dies is contiguous with the identity the exists in

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<sup>44</sup> Gousmett, *Shall the Body Strive*, 240. Gousmett points out many patristic writers believed in an eschatological return to the original Paradise; he notes Irenaeus and Lactantius in that regard, as well as the apocryphal 4th/5th century *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

<sup>45</sup> *Hom. op. NPNF 2*, V:409.

<sup>46</sup> Gousmett, *Shall the Body Strive*, 240.

<sup>47</sup> “I am sorry from my heart that Plato has been the caterer to all these heretics.... I shall sufficiently refute the heretics if I overthrow the argument of Plato” - Tertullian, *An.*, *ANF III:203*.

the intermediate state and in the resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

Scripture does not furnish us with a mechanical description of how the soul in the presence of Jesus and the body reposing in a grave are joined back together at the time of the resurrection, and it need not do so. Scripture also does not give detailed explanations to many essential doctrines, such as the nuances of the incarnation of the eternal, uncreated Second Person of the Trinity, spending nine months in utero and experiencing the human birthing process. Again, it need not do so. The importance is not found in whether all the “cogs and gears” are understood, but in the faithfulness of God to fulfill His Word. If God said there would be a resurrection and at the time “we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 5:51-52), then exactly what has been revealed will happen, regardless of whether humans necessarily understand the “how” or not.

As far as the majority of the church fathers were concerned, the prospect of eventual death was not an occasion for melancholy or malaise. Since there was a shred belief in the “ultimate restitution of all rational beings”, and since they were “unoppressed with thoughts of total depravity or eternal punishment”, the fathers “knew no morbid feeling dread or despair, and where as joyous in spirit as they were daring in thought.” For all that, the conception of the intermediate state is not under any firm consensus. With a primary focus on the “deification of humanity”, the fathers tended to be less precise about the intermediate state, apparently viewing it as of minor importance”.

This the great Christian truth, that a time will arrive when at the judgment-seat of Christ every one shall receive according to their deeds, was relegated to the background as a mere mode of redemption, one of the “channels through which it works.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Jennings, *A Biblical Portrait*, 190.

<sup>49</sup> William Fairweather, *Origen and Greek Patristic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 231.

**Western voices.** The distinction between “Western” and “Eastern” voices in the Church comes from the primary language used in writing and preaching. The Western fathers employed Latin; Tertullian is considered the father of Western Christianity and theology as he was the first to use Latin in his writings. The Eastern fathers, conversely, typically utilized Greek and were more involved in adoration, contemplation and vision than those in the West, who tended towards theological abstractions and rational intellection. Here we will consider first three of the Western fathers — Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine — then follow with three celebrated Eastern fathers — Irenaeus, Athenagoras and John Chrysostom - on their views on death as an event in every person’s life.

**Tertullian.** Some of Tertullian’s thinking on death and the afterlife has already been discussed. Concerning the man, historical records are sketchy but an apparent consensus has Tertullian (full name: Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus) as born in 145 A. D.,<sup>50</sup> probably in or near Carthage, the son of a Roman proconsul centurion. He apparently became a Christian around 196 A.D., joined the Montanist sect c. 201 A.D.,<sup>51</sup> and probably lived to a very old age, dying somewhere between 220 A. D. And 240 A.D.<sup>52</sup> He was known for his fiery demeanor which translated into his writings.<sup>53</sup> As previously noted, Tertullian held to the idea the believer at death went to an intermediate state to await the resurrection, unless the individual was a martyr.

And if we speak of Paradise, the place of heavenly bliss appointed to receive the spirits of the saints, severed from the knowledge of this world by that fiery zone as a sort of enclosure, the Elysian plains have

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<sup>50</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, “Introductory Note”, ANF III:3.

<sup>51</sup> C. Dodgson, tr. *Tertullian* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1842), iii-1v. For a brief overview of Montanism, see Stanley M. Burgess, “Montanism”, *NIDPCM*, 903-904.

<sup>52</sup> Coxe, “Introductory Note”, ANF III:51.

<sup>53</sup> *DECB*, xix.

taken possession of their faith.<sup>54</sup>

The apostle Paul's reference to "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2) most likely reflects the Jewish idea that the highest of the heavens is the place of God's dwelling.<sup>55</sup> It is possible, then, to understand Paul's use of "paradise" in relation to the third heaven as his best allowable description of what he saw, and not a nod, necessarily, to a "Paradise" as a place separate from the presence of God. Tertullian understood Paradise as "the position that every soul is detained in safe keeping in Hades until the day of the Lord."<sup>56</sup> It is in his *Treatise on the Soul* that Tertullian argues from a Platonic anthropology<sup>57</sup> that the physical body is prison to the soul, but

When the soul, by the power of death is released from its concretion with the flesh, it is by the very release cleansed and purified.<sup>58</sup>

Tertullian does not explain his meaning of "cleansed and purified", only that after death, the soul "by virtue of its liberty regains its divinity".<sup>59</sup> He also does not expand on his comment that the soul "regains its divinity", as nothing in the Scriptures speaks of the soul having a "divine" status. As to the soul being cleansed and purified, Tertullian may well refer to that which is made complete in the soul after death; the purification work done in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17, 6:6), which at times may well experience hindrances (1 John 2:1), is fully completed when the opportunity to sin is removed.

Now it is the flesh which is killed by death; the flesh,

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<sup>54</sup> *Ap.*, ANF III:52.

<sup>55</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 404.

<sup>56</sup> *An.*, ANF III:231.

<sup>57</sup> Platonism, derived mostly from the successors to the Greek philosopher Plato, affected the Christian faith in several ways, most notably Plato's emphasis on the soul being immortal and his emphasis on rational absolutism which is said to be of some import to "a basis for theories of absolute monarchy" (J. M. Dillon, "Plato, Platonism", *DNTB*, 805).

<sup>58</sup> *An.*, ANF III:230.

<sup>59</sup> *An.*, ANF III:230.

therefore, will be revived by the resurrection. Surely in killing men's way of life from the flesh, and its opposite, reviving, amounts to restoring life to the flesh, it must needs be the flesh rise again, to which the life, which has been taken away by killing, has to be restored by vivification.<sup>60</sup>

It is possible Tertullian draws from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:23. Death is not the final act but only a part of the process from salvation to the final consummation and a forever presence with the Lord. Paul affirmed in 1 Corinthians 6:14 that the God who raised Jesus from the dead, in power, will do the same for the redeemed. Holiness in the believer ought to be encouraged by the promise of the coming resurrection, which itself is promised through the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>61</sup> Such is Paul's point also in Colossians 3:1, that having been raised with Christ, the believer's mind needs to be "set"<sup>62</sup> on things that are "above", the place of Christ seated with the Father, as opposed to being "set" on the things of the earth.

Although Tertullian and some modern expositors differ on the nature of death and the post-mortem destination of the soul, it is unfair to then charge Tertullian with employing any kind of a non-Biblical approach. He approached his writings as a man of faith necessarily guided by the Scriptures.

For Tertullian the proper interpretation of Scripture is found in adherence to the rule of faith which had been handed down by and safeguarded in the church. The rule of faith must be adhered to in the interpretation of the Scriptures because true faith is found in that rule. Tertullian was fully aware that scripture is open to many different interpretations. This is why he argues for the rule of faith. The

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<sup>60</sup> *De Res. Carn.*, ANF III:565.

<sup>61</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 616.

<sup>62</sup> *zēteite*, the present imperative act of *zēteō*, "to seek or to inquire". That it is a present imperative "suggests a continual and habitual action" (*NLEKGNT*, 467).

apostolic faith is manifested in the rule of faith, and it is here that proper interpretation of Scripture is found.<sup>63</sup>

**Cyprian.** During intense persecution of the Church, Cyprian served as the bishop of Carthage, often having to work in hiding.<sup>64</sup> Of his origins little is known; it has been suggested he was born in or near Carthage, lived a life of privilege, eventually studied law. He became an accomplished orator, a highly respected position in ancient times.<sup>65</sup> If his birth was in 200 A.D., then he was well into his adult years when he came to Christ through the influence of an otherwise obscure Carthaginian presbyter Caecilius. He was baptized in 246 A.D. after his conversion, made bishop in 248 A.D. and was martyred by the Romans in 258 A.D.<sup>66</sup> A careful scholar, a student of Tertullian, he chose a life of poverty so as to help any needy person he encountered.<sup>67</sup> Cyprian is, among the fathers of the church, most responsible for a “conception of the body of Christ as an organic whole, in which every member has an honourable (*sic*) function.”<sup>68</sup>

Cyprian, in concord with many of the other church fathers, held to a favorable view of martyrdom, insisting it should be the “craving and wish to hasten to Christ by the aid of a quicker death.”<sup>69</sup> Embracing Philippians 1:21 (“To me to live is Christ, to die is gain”), he wrote:

(we count) it the greatest gain no longer to be held by the snare of the world, no longer to be liable to the sins and vices of the flesh, but taken away from

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<sup>63</sup> Craig D. Allert, “What Are We Trying to Conserve?: Evangelicalism and *Sola Scriptura*,” *EvQ* 76.4 (2004), 346.

<sup>64</sup> *DECB*, xvi.

<sup>65</sup> John Alfred Faulkner, *Cyprian the Churchman* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham; New York: Eaton and Mains, 1906), 18-19.

<sup>66</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, “Introductory Note”, ANF V:263.

<sup>67</sup> Faulkner, *Cyprian*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> Coxe, “Introductory”, ANF V:263

<sup>69</sup> *Mort.* 5, ANF V:470.

smarting trouble, and freed from the envenomed fangs of the devil, to go to the call of Christ to the joy of eternal salvation.<sup>70</sup>

In a treatise to his son Quirinus, the 58th section is titled “No one should be made sad by death”,<sup>71</sup> leaning 1 Corinthians 15:53-55, among others. When he was tried by the Romans for “sacrilege” for refusing to sacrifice to the emperor, and although he was given opportunity to make a sacrifice and so spare his life, he refused. After the proconsul read the sentence of death, Cyprian simply replied, “Thanks be to God.”<sup>72</sup>

As a student of Tertullian, it is no surprise Cyprian referred to the destination of the dead as “paradise”, although it appears he does not elucidate further as to whether he understands “paradise” as a separate place than heaven (as did Tertullian) or as a way of describing heaven and being with Christ (as did Paul).

We should consider, dearly beloved brethren - we should ever and anon reflect that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the (heavenly) kingdom.

What pleasure is there in the heavenly kingdom, without fear of death; and how lofty and perpetual a happiness with eternity of living!<sup>73</sup>

Cyprian firmly believed any who would shrink away from death, especially martyrdom for the faith, would be those whose lives had a fear of death. He listed all the benefits of being in heaven

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<sup>70</sup> *Mort.* 8, ANF V:470.

<sup>71</sup> *Treatises (Third book)*, ANF V:548,

<sup>72</sup> Faulkner, *Cyprian*, 202-203.

<sup>73</sup> *Mort.*, ANF, V:475

— the “rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise” - and then criticized those who, for whatever reason, were not willing to give up their life for the sake of Christ.

Who, in the midst of these things, is trembling and sad, except he who is without hope and faith? For it is for him to fear death who is not willing to go to Christ. It is for him to be unwilling to go to Christ who does not believe that he is about to reign with Christ.<sup>74</sup>

It is possible Matthew 10:33 influenced Cyprian in his exhortation concerning death through martyrdom, when he wrote, “Did He not before ordain both for those who deny Him eternal punishments and for those that confess Him eternal rewards?”<sup>75</sup> In his treatise specifically on martyrdom, he praised death because of remaining true to the faith.

What then, is martyrdom? It is the end of sins, the limit of dangers, the guide of salvation, the teacher of patience, the home of life, on the journey to which those things moreover befall which in the coming crisis might be considered torments. By this also testimony is borne to the Name, and the majesty of the Name is greatly enhanced...<sup>76</sup>

The way to heaven, Cyprian firmly believed, was opened to those who were martyred for the Christian faith.

Heaven lies open to our blood; the dwelling-place of

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<sup>74</sup> *Mort.*, ANF, V:469.

<sup>75</sup> *Laps.*, ANF, V:439.

<sup>76</sup> “On the Glory of Martyrdom”, ANF V:580. Dr. Wallis, the translator of the English texts of Cyprian in ANF, comments in the first footnote that the certainty of Cyprian as the author has been debated; Erasmus, the 16th century Catholic scholar, did not believe Cyprian had written this piece, but Pamelius, a contemporary Flemish theologian and bishop, was certain Cyprian had written it. Here I will assume Cyprian is the author, with the caveat that ANF assigns it and other treatises to a section entitled “Treatises Attributed to Cyprian.”

Gehenna gives way to our blood; and among all the attainments of glory, the title of blood is sealed as the fairest, and its crown is designated as most complete.<sup>77</sup>

As persecution by Imperial Rome increased against the Church, the goal being to eliminate the atheists (which the Christians were accused of being because of their refusal to recognize the emperor as divine) and the heretics, Cyprian in his office of bishop encountered those who avoided martyrdom by not making a confession of Christ, then later seeking to be reinstated to the Church. It is said Cyprian did make certain allowances for such individuals.

His opinion that there might be occasions when a man would not be justified in accepting the offered crown of martyrdom, and that flight from persecution in such circumstances was ‘a private confession of Christ as martyrdom is a public one,’ must have saved to the Church valuable lives, although the problem of decision in any given case was not the least of the difficulties which arose between Christianity and heathenism.<sup>78</sup>

**Augustine.** The bishop of Hippo produced a prodigious amount of written material, perhaps identifying him as the most prolific writer among the church fathers. Like several of the other fathers, Augustine’s theology was influenced by Platonism; he made efforts to correct the philosophical system in order to harmonize it with the Christian faith. He faced a daunting task; it is probable Platonism had affected Christian theology since the time of Justin Martyr, who lived four centuries before Augustine.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> “Martyrdom”, ANF V:581.

<sup>78</sup> Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1897), 177.

<sup>79</sup> Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 12. On Augustine’s Platonism, TeSelle writes: “Augustine as a Platonist was

Augustine connected spiritual death in salvation to the experience of the soul after physical death.

Now he whose soul does not die to this world and begin here to be conformed to the truth, falls when the body dies into a more terrible death, and shall revive, not to change his earthly for a heavenly habitation, but to endure the penalty of his sin.<sup>80</sup>

Augustine's thinking aligns strongly with the apostle Paul in Romans 7:5-6. The fruit of a life *sans* Christ is death; the fruit of a life with Christ is a release from the law which identified sin and thereby enabled death (see verses 11-12). A failure to be "crucified to the world" through identification with Christ by faith in salvation (cf. Galatians 2:20)<sup>81</sup> means an active flesh which dominates the life of the individual. To die physically without having died spiritually to sin is to remain dead in sin and in rebellion against God.

Like Paul, Augustine attributed the presence of death in the world to sin (cf. Romans 5:12). Had the first parents remained obedient, they might never have experienced death, but if they disobeyed "death should be visited on them with just sentence".<sup>82</sup> Augustine saw all human misery - which was

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certain that there is an intelligible realm of ideas. He began from experience: the human mind judges sensory things, which are beneath itself; it judges in accordance with norms or ideals that are *above* the judging mind. The question is how the mind becomes aware of those norms. He usually speaks of 'illumination' by the divine Word.... If Augustine is confident that the divine Light is always shining in the mind, he knows that we are most likely to become aware of it when we are reasoning and judging about other things" (18) (*italics original*).

<sup>80</sup> *Doctr. chr.* I:21, NPNF 1, II:527.

<sup>81</sup> "Paul uses the perfect tense in speaking of his died with Christ, that is, in speaking of something that once took place and has not lost its power since. This thing that has happened somewhere else in the past does refer to Paul's subjective experience, but to the death of Christ. The believers, by virtue of their corporate belonging to Him, were included in that dying" (Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches in Galatia* (NICNT) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 105. Augustine's "conformed to the truth" is no doubt the very death of Christ of which Paul insists is the foundation for salvation.

<sup>82</sup> *Civ.* 13.1, NPNF 1, II:245.

bolstered and continued by “social and individual egotisms” - ensured “ignorance, mortality and the brevity of life”, as well as a weak will, all of which led to “arrogant and willful rejection of the Creator’s good intentions. What mankind needed was forgiveness of sin and the remedy of eternal life”.<sup>83</sup>

We certainly, as no Christian doubts, are dead both in soul and body: in soul, because of sin; in body, because of the punishment of sin, and through this also in body because of sin. And to both these parts of ourselves, that is, both to soul and to body, there was a need both of a medicine and of a resurrection, that what had been changed for the worse might be changed for the better. Now the death of the soul is ungodliness, and the death of the body is corruptibility, through which comes also a departure of the soul from the body. For as the soul dies when God leaves it, so the body dies when the soul leaves it; whereby the former becomes foolish, the latter lifeless.<sup>84</sup>

Augustine was extremely caught up in questions about immortality, especially during his 30’s. He felt all of human life was a “race towards death”. But his conviction that death was, for the believer, not the end he owed not to the influence of Platonism but “on faith in the risen Christ.”<sup>85</sup>

In order, therefore, that as by one man came death, so by one man might come also the resurrection of the dead;<sup>86</sup> ...the Mediator of life, making it plain that death is not to be feared, which by the condition of humanity cannot now be escaped, but rather ungodliness, which can be guarded against by faith, meets us at the end to which we have come, but not by the way by which we came. For we, indeed, came

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<sup>83</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (London: Oxford, 2001), 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Trin.*, NPNF 1, III:71.

<sup>85</sup> Chadwick, *Augustine*, 43.

<sup>86</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:21-22

to death through sin; He through righteousness; and, therefore, as our death is the punishment of sin, so His death was made a sacrifice for sin.<sup>87</sup>

Holiness was a hallmark, in a sense, of Augustine's thinking, in agreement with most of the other patristic writers.<sup>88</sup> Consistency in the Christian life was a non-negotiable; temptation to do other than what would be Scriptural holiness, such as seeking a pagan healer when one is on a sickbed or nearing death, was unconscionable. The believer must practice a "martyrdom of peace", a standing for Christ without regard for any possibly negative outcome. For Augustine, whether in life or death, the Christian faith was relevant without consideration of the circumstance or situation. He was firm in his conviction the only significant life was the Christian life.<sup>89</sup>

**Eastern voices.** Representative of the Greek fathers are Irenaeus, Athenagoras and John Chrysostom.<sup>90</sup>

**Irenaeus.** Irenaeus served as the bishop of Lyons (modern France). His early discipleship in the Christian faith was through his relationship first with Polycarp; when he was martyred, Irenaeus spent time learning from Papias, of whom it is believed was a disciple of John the beloved and a close

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<sup>87</sup> *Trin.*, NPNF 1, III:77.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Clement of Alexandria: "For sanctity, as I conceive it, is perfect pureness of mind, and deeds, and thoughts, and words too, and in its last degree sinlessness in dreams. And sufficient purification to a man, I reckon, is thorough and sure repentance. If, condemning ourselves for our former actions, we go forward, after these things taking thought, and divesting our mind both of the things which please us through the senses, and of our former transgressions" (*Strom.*, ANF II:435).

<sup>89</sup> Eric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE* (Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University, 2012), 73-74.

<sup>90</sup> For an able introduction to the Eastern church, see Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church* (London: John Murray, 1884); Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*; J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: Methuen, 1958).

friend of Polycarp.<sup>91</sup> When Plothinus, bishop of Lyons, was martyred at 90 years of age, Irenaeus was elevated as successor. Irenaeus showed through the caliber of his writings a decided excellence of “ability, learning, zeal and sound judgment”, leading to the conclusion that “he was more than a worthy successor” to Plothinus.<sup>92</sup>

Irenaeus believed God had put boundaries around man’s sin through the instrumentality of death. Death was not necessarily all bad; it was, in far as sin and God’s limits are concerned, a good thing for the human condition.

Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner forever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. He set a bound to his (state of) sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease,<sup>93</sup> putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live in sin, and dying to it, might begin to live for God.<sup>94</sup>

Irenaeus apparently held to the idea of being in the presence of the Lord at the time of death; believers would “at death depart into the invisible place destined for them by God, and there remain, waiting for the resurrection.”<sup>95</sup> The invisible place he understood as “Paradise.” At the time of resurrection the souls in Paradise would receive their new bodies, rising “entirely, that

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<sup>91</sup> Bercot, *Early Christian Beliefs*, xix.

<sup>92</sup> James Beaven, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Rivington, 1841), 15.

<sup>93</sup> Romans 6:7.

<sup>94</sup> *Haer.* ANF, I:561.

<sup>95</sup> Beavens, *Irenaeus*, 235.

is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall (then) come into the presence of God.”<sup>96</sup>

Apparently adopting Paul’s thinking in 1 Corinthians 15, Irenaeus understood the physical body being transformed from corruption to incorruption. Death could hold sway over the body but it could not resist the divine infusion of life.

If, then, when death takes possession of a man, it drives life away from him, and proves him to be dead, much more does life, when it has obtained power over the man, drive out death, and restore him as living unto God. For if death brings mortality, why should not life, when it comes, vivify man? ...”God has wiped away every tear from every face.” Thus the former life is expelled, because it was not given by the Spirit, but by the breath.<sup>97</sup>

**Athenagoras.** Hailing from Athens, Athenagoras was afforded an opportunity for an excellent classic education, including literature, philosophy and logic. His conversion to Christianity is said to be about 177 A.D. In the course of his ministry used his education and ability as a philosopher to present defenses of the Christian faith to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.<sup>98</sup> He is regarded as a Christian apologist despite the fact only two known works he wrote have survived: *Legatio pro Christianis* (A Plea for the Christians) and *De resurrectione* (The Resurrection). He is hardly ever mentioned in the course of church history.<sup>99</sup> Yet, his defense of the resurrection is said to be in the best possible philosophical construction of that time.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Haer.*, ANF, I:561.

<sup>97</sup> *Haer.*, ANF, I:537.

<sup>98</sup> F. A. March, *Athenagoras* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1876), 90-91.

<sup>99</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, “Introductory Note”, ANF II:127.

<sup>100</sup> John Bertram Peterson, “Athenagoras”, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. 2). New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907 (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02042b.htm>), accessed September 28, 2021.

Athenagoras used a description of death in connection with his apology or defense of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He understood death as a “corruption” and an “interruption”, a temporary and brief period between natural life and resurrected life. Death and sleep were brothers, since the dead exhibit a similar state as those who slumber.<sup>101</sup> Athenagoras reasoned that since God could (and did) create life initially, then His ability to do so post-mortem should be assumed.

...that same power can reunite what is dissolved, and rise up what is prostrate, and restore the dead to life again, and put the corruptible into a state of incorruption.<sup>102</sup>

Since God created the human form, Athenagoras argued, then He would similarly be able to recreate it after death through resurrection. He challenged those who for whatever reason denied the fact of the resurrection to prove God is unable to bring about such a return to life.

This they will succeed in,<sup>103</sup> if they are able to show that it is either impossible for God, or contrary to His will, to unite and gather together again bodies that are dead, or even entirely dissolved into the elements, so as to constitute the same persons. If they cannot do this, let them cease from this godless disbelief, and from blasphemy against sacred things....<sup>104</sup>

**John Chrysostom.** His writings give very little about his early life. Most of what is known about John Chrysostom comes from those who chose to write about him. His father was Latin, his mother a Greek. All of John’s education was in Greek, through

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<sup>101</sup> *Res.*, ANF II:158.

<sup>102</sup> *Res.*, ANF II:151.

<sup>103</sup> The challenge was for those who denied God’s ability to resurrect back to life “to demonstrate that the resurrection is utterly unworthy of credit (*Res.*, ANF II:150).

<sup>104</sup> *Res.*, ANF II:150.

his mother's influence, and although she died when he was young, his training in Greek was so thorough he never learned another language.<sup>105</sup> He was known for his direct, uncompromising approach to the need to confront and defeat sin and in his declarations for the necessity for holiness. Of him, it has been said:

No scruples of real or false delicacy - no dread of entering the lists with popular prejudices, or with the influence of wealth and power-no regard for any arbitrary rules of taste-ever deterred him from ferreting out vice, and then holding it, as it were, at arm's length, to the gaze of a blushing audience. In this respect, he affords us a grand and imposing spectacle. Living in a most degenerate age, amongst a gay, vicious, and degraded people, he undertook the Herculean task of sweeping away the filth which had accumulated for ages. If he had paused to calculate the probabilities of success, even his daring spirit would have sunk within him; but from the moment when the hands of God's bishop had been laid upon him, he felt impelled and constrained to engage in the work of preaching repentance : he had been bid to go, and he went out, not knowing whither he went - whether it was to work a reformation in society, or to perish in the glorious but vain attempt. He was a wonderful prelate, and an illustrious exemplar.<sup>106</sup>

Church historian Philip Schaff describes Chrysostom as “the greatest pulpit orator and commentator of the Greek church” who is still the most honored of all the church fathers, and

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<sup>105</sup> Chrysostomus Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time* (Vol. 1 - Antioch) (tr. M. Gonzaga) (London and Glasgow: Sands & Co., 1959), 1-2.

<sup>106</sup> Anon., *St. Chrysostom's Picture of His Age* (London: SPCK, 1876), 3-4. There is some evidence this small book was penned by the eminent Greek scholar F. J. A. Hort, but since the title page bears no author's name, we shall leave it as an anonymous work.

whose reputation is surpassed by none.<sup>107</sup> His early training was as a lawyer, a profession in which he apparently had no peers. A growing dissatisfaction with his life led him to salvation at the age of 20, baptism at 23, and a complete change in his character, from worldly and often crass to a “radical and permanent” change to “dedication for the service of Christ.”<sup>108</sup>

Chrysostom viewed the entire human condition through the lens of his monastic vows. For example, he gave no encouragement to wealthy persons; he believed they necessarily should be free from the weight of those riches.

So that if anyone wishes to have the possession of his riches, and the use and the ownership entire, let him disencumber himself from the all; since, truly, he who doth not this must at all events be separated from them at death; and frequently before his death will lose them, in the midst of dangers and innumerable ills.<sup>109</sup>

There were times when Chrysostom evidenced thoroughly Platonic philosophy in his own reasoning. In his homily on Romans 7:14-8:15, Chrysostom argued that, since death was the result of sin, and sin inflames the passions, then “in order to live virtuously, one needs to control the passions.” Since death was to come upon all, some felt they could experience as much “pleasure and indulgence” as they possibly could. On this he demurred; every believer had a responsibility to work for “Christian self-fashioning and self-mastery” as part of the “processes in which the individual aims to manage and overcome the grip of death, and its oft-sinful consequences, on the body.”<sup>110</sup> Death as the gateway to live eternally was a

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<sup>107</sup> Philip Schaff, “Prolegomena: The Life and Work of St. John Chrysostom”, NPNF 1, IX:5.

<sup>108</sup> Schaff, “Prolegomena”, NPNF 1, IX:6.

<sup>109</sup> *Hom. de stat.*, NPNF 1, IX:351.

<sup>110</sup> Chris L. deWet, “The Practice of Everyday Death: Thanatology and Self-fashioning in John Chrysostom’s Thirteenth Homily on Romans”, *HTS Theological Studies* 71 (1), Article #2957

process initiated at salvation, so that the physical (mortal) body was not permitted to actually live in — enjoy and find meaning — in this present world.

Suffer not thy body then to live in this world, that it may live then! Make it die, that it die not. For if it keep living, it will not live; but if it die, then shall it live.<sup>111</sup>

Though he does not specifically mention it, it is possible Chrysostom may have had in his mind John 12:24, where Jesus says that for a seed to become fruitful, it must first die. The need for the movement towards death in order to gain life is part of “gymnastics of the spirit, the contest against the lusts of the world.”<sup>112</sup>

The most graphic of the New Testament examples of the uselessness of earthly riches after death is in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).<sup>113</sup> In torment, the rich man’s wealth was of no succor for him; Lazarus, in the bosom of Abraham, had no need for earthly wealth. The earthly roles for each man were reversed in the afterlife. The rich man became poor and destitute while Lazarus, being in Abraham’s presence, had everything of which he had need.

It is with this thought that it comes as no shock the conditions Jesus set forth for being a true disciple. The cost of following Jesus was, simply put, to become like Lazarus before his death — give up everything in this world so as to be able to carry one’s cross (Matthew 16:24; || Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). The fathers

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(<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/htsv71i1.2957>, accessed September 11, 2021), 2-3.

<sup>111</sup> *Hom. Rom. XIII*, NPNF 1, XI:436.

<sup>112</sup> deWet, “The Practice of Everyday Death”, 4.

<sup>113</sup> No consensus exists among scholars as to whether this account is a true parable or the relating of an actual event. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address that issue, as its genre is not germane to the present discussion. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 203-27 for a detailed analysis of the passage.

saw death not in a negative sense but as a divinely ordained pathway from the mortal life, with all of its pain and sorrows, to the next one, where there is the promise of no more death, as well as no more pain and sorrow (Revelation 21:4, Isaiah 25:8, 35:10). That which is in the world, which would be viewed as “encumbrances”, must be abandoned in order to be in full and true communion with Jesus Christ.

We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love.<sup>114</sup>

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

### **General**

- A. D. *anno domini* (“year of our Lord”)  
ANE Ancient Near East  
ANF Ante-Nicene Fathers  
Anon. Anonymous  
DECB Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs  
DNTB Dictionary of New Testament Background  
e.g. *exemplo gratia*, “for example”  
*EvQ Evangelical Quarterly*  
NAC New American Commentary  
NCBC New Century Bible Commentary  
NLEKGNT The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament  
NICNT New International Commentary New Testament  
NIDPCM New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements  
NPNF 1 Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1  
NPNF 2 Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2  
|| parallel  
tr. translated by, translator  
WBC Word Biblical Commentary

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<sup>114</sup> *Strom.* ANF, II:411.

## Fathers of the Church

### Athenagoras

*Leg.* *Legatio pro Christianis* ("In Defense of the Christians")

*Res.* *De resurrection* ("The Resurrection")

### Augustine

*Civ.* *De civitate Dei* ("The City of God")

*Doctr. chr.* *De doctrina christiana* ("On Christian Doctrine")

*Trin.* *De Trinitate* ("The Trinity")

### Clement of Alexandria

*Strom.* *Stromata* ("Miscellanies")

### Commodianus

*Instr.* *Instructiones* ("Instructions")

### Constitutions of the Holy Apostles

*Const. ap.* *Constitutiones apostolicae*

### Cyprian

*Laps.* *De lapsis* ("On the lapsed")

*Mort.* *De mortilitate* ("On the Mortality")

### Gregory of Nyssa

*Hom. op.* *De Opificio Hominis* ("On the Making of Man")

### Irenaeus

*Haer.* *Adversus Haereses* ("Against Heresies")

### John Chrysostom

*Hom. de stat.* *Homiliae de Statuis* ("On the Statues")

*Hom. Rom.* *Homiliae in epistulam ad Romanos*  
(Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans)

### Justin Martyr

*Jus. De res.* *Justin on the Resurrection (fragmentary)*

### Mathetes ("Disciple")

*Diog.* *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*

### Methodius

*Res.* *De resurrection* ("On the Resurrection")

### Tertullian

*Ad.* *Ad Martyras* ("To the Martyrs")

*An.* *De anima* ("The Soul")

*Ap.* *Apologia*

*De Res. Carn.* *De Resurrectione Carnis* ("On The Resurrection of the Flesh")

*Mart. Perp. et Fel.* *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*

*Pat.* *De Patientia* ("On Patience")

*Praescr.* *De prescriptione haereticorum* ("On Prescription Against Heretics")

*Scorp.*                      *Scorpiace* (“Antidote for the Scorpion’s  
Sting”)

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