

**ST GREGORY OF NYSSA
THE SOUL AND THE RESURRECTION**

*Translated from the Greek and introduced
by*

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CHAPTER 6

The Purification of the Soul

"But in the story about the rich man and the poor man we also learn another doctrine which will have great relevance to our subject. The parable makes that man (the one who is subject to the passions and a lover of the flesh), when he sees that his misfortune is inescapable, show a concern for those who belong to his family on earth. Abraham says that the life of those who live in the flesh is not deprived of providence, but the guidance of the law and the prophets is available within their power of choice. Still the rich man continues to importune him on the grounds that the message may be convincing to them because of its unexpectedness if it is brought by someone returning to life from the dead."

"So then," I said, "what doctrine do we find in this?"

"The soul of Lazarus," she said, "is occupied with its present circumstances and does not turn toward anything which it has left behind. The rich man still sticks to the fleshy life as if with bird-lime which he has not thoroughly cleaned off even when he has ceased from life. He is still concerned with flesh and blood.¹ From the fact that he begs for those who share his family to be removed from evils, it is clear that he is not yet released from fleshy attachment. By this story," she said, "the Lord seems to be teaching that we who are living in the flesh ought as much as

¹ This section is modelled on a passage in Plato's *Phaedo* (81A-D), where Socrates speaks of souls which are contaminated by attachment to bodily pleasures and cannot escape to the invisible divine world after death. Macrina, however, replaces the word "body" with "flesh" in the Pauline sense of sinful human nature (body and soul).

possible to separate ourselves and release ourselves from its hold by the life of virtue, so that after death we may not need another death to cleanse us from the remains of the fleshly glue. Then, as if chains have been broken away from the soul, its course may become light and easy towards the good, when no bodily weight drags the soul to itself. So if one should become completely carnal in his mind, devoting all the activity and energy of his soul to the will of the flesh,² such a man even when he gets out of the flesh is not separated from its experiences. Those who spend most of their time in evil-smelling places, even if they go out into the fresh air, are not cleansed from the unpleasantness which has adhered to them from prolonged contact. In the same way, even when the transition has been made to the invisible and rarified life, the lovers of the flesh would doubtless be unable to avoid bringing with them some of the fleshly odor. This makes their pangs more grievous, as their soul has become partly materialized from such an environment. There seems to be some support for this opinion in what certain people say, that often around the bodies' graves there appear some kind of shadowy shapes of the departed.³ If this really happens, it proves that the soul has become more attached than it should be to the present fleshly life, so that even when it is driven out of the flesh it is not willing to fly clean away. It does not even allow its form to be completely changed into invisibility, but stays with its shape even after its shape has been dissolved.⁴ Although it has already gone outside of its shape, it wanders longingly in the material places and spends its time in them."

I kept silent a little while, thinking over the sense of what she had said. Then I said, "It seems to me that some discrepancy arises between what you have said just now and what we examined earlier

2 Compare John 1:13.

3 Plato, *Phaedo* 81D.

4 The idea that the shape may not completely disappear after death comes from a pagan belief that the soul after death retains a ghostly kind of body.

concerning the emotions. If such impulses of the soul are considered to operate in us because of our relationship with the irrational animals, impulses which our discussion enumerated previously, namely anger, fear, desire, pleasure, and the like—we said that the good use of these is virtue, but through their defective use evil comes about.⁵ Besides, we discussed the contribution of each of the other passions to the virtuous life and in particular the fact that we are led to God by desire. We are drawn upwards towards Him as if by a rope. The discussion seems somehow to be working against our purpose," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that if every irrational impulse in us is quenched after our purification, not even the desiring impulse will exist at all. If this should not exist, there would not even be a yearning for the better, since the soul would not retain the kind of movement which could arouse it toward the appetite for good things."

"To this we reply," she said, "that the faculty of contemplation and discernment is proper to the godlike part of the soul, since by these we comprehend even the divine.⁶ So, you see, if our soul should become free of its attachment to the irrational emotions either by our effort in this life or by the purification hereafter, it will in no way be hindered from the contemplation of the beautiful. For beauty has in its own nature an attractiveness for everyone who looks at it. So if the soul becomes clean of all evil, it will exist entirely in beauty. The divine is beautiful by its own nature. The soul will be joined with the divine through its purity, adhering to that which is proper to it. If this should happen, there will no longer be a need for the impulse of desire to lead us toward the beautiful. He who passes his life in darkness will desire the light; if he should come into the light, attainment will replace desire. The possibility of attainment makes desire useless and vain.

5 See above p. 60.

6 See above p. 54.

Therefore the soul will not receive any disadvantage in respect to participation in the good, if it should be freed from these impulses. It will go back to itself and see clearly what it is in its nature, and through its own beauty it will look upon the archetype as if in a mirror and an image. We can truly say that the accurate likeness of the divine⁷ consists in our soul's imitation of the superior Nature.

"That Nature which is above all understanding, located far beyond what appears in us, leads its own life in another manner, not as we are now in our way of living; for we human beings are carried wherever the impulse of our choice goes, because our nature is always entirely in motion. The soul is not disposed in the same way in its forward direction (as one might say) and in the reverse. Hope initiates the forward motion, but memory takes over the guidance as the motion goes forwards towards hope. If hope should lead the soul towards that which is good by nature, the motion of choice marks a bright track on the memory. But if the soul is deceived of the good, because hope has tricked it with some imitation of beauty, the memory which follows the experiences turns into shame.⁸ And thus this civil war is established in the soul, in which memory fights with hope, accusing it of guiding our choice badly. The feeling of shame clearly interprets some such meaning, when the soul is stung by the result. The soul attacks the thoughtless impulse with repentance as if with a whip and enlists forgetfulness as an ally against the source of grief.

"But because our nature is impoverished of the beautiful, it always reaches towards that which it needs.⁹ This appetite for what is lacking is the desiring condition of our nature, which is either foiled of the truly beautiful through misjudgment or perhaps even obtains by chance that which is good to obtain. But the Nature which exceeds every good

7 Genesis 1:26.

8 This discussion of shame, with mention of a whip, reminds us again of the chariot myth in Plato's *Phaedrus* (254A ff.).

9 In Plato's *Symposium* (201B), Socrates asserts that Love (*Ἔρως*) is always needy.

conception and surpasses every power,¹⁰ because it needs none of those things which are thought of as good, being itself the fullness of good things, and because it is not in beauty by participation of some beauty,¹¹ but is itself the nature of the beautiful (whatever the mind may assume the beautiful to be), does not even admit the impulse of hope in itself, for hope operates only in respect to what is not present. "Why does one still hope for what he has?" says the apostle.¹² Neither does it need the activity of memory to understand the things which are, for that which is seen does not need to be remembered. Since, then, the divine Nature surpasses every good, and the good is dear in every way to the good, for this reason, looking at itself, it both wants what it has and has what it wants, not receiving anything from outside into itself. But nothing is outside it, except evil only, which (paradoxical though this may be), has its being in non-being; for there is no other origin of evil but the deprivation of being.¹³ That which may properly be said to exist is the nature of the good. So that which is not in true existence must be in non-existence.

"Since, then, the soul becomes godlike when it has put off all the varied impulses of its nature, and when it has passed beyond desire it has entered into that towards which it was previously being raised by desire, it no longer gives any place in itself either to hope or to memory. It has what it was hoping for, and it drives out memory from its mind in its occupation with the enjoyment of good things. Thus it imitates the superior life, being conformed to the properties of the divine Nature, so that nothing else is left to it

10 Compare Ephesians 3:19, Philippians 4:7.

11 Macrina equates God with the Form of the Beautiful. According to Plato, material things are beautiful by participation in this ideal Form (see *Symposium* 211B, *Phaedo* 100C).

12 Romans 8:24.

13 The idea that evil is deprivation of being arose among Neoplatonists; see Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.13.92-96, and Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8.3. The Christian Origen and the pagan Plotinus studied under the same teacher at Alexandria.

but the disposition of love, as it becomes attached in its nature to the beautiful. This is love, the interior attachment to that which is pleasing. So when the soul which has become simple and uniform and an accurate image of God finds that truly simple and immaterial good, the one thing which is really lovable and desirable, it attaches itself to it and combines with it through the impulse and operation of love. It conforms itself to that which is always being grasped and found, and becomes through its likeness to the good that which the nature is in which it participates. If the soul has no desire because it has no lack of any good thing, it would follow that the soul which has no insufficiency also casts out from itself the desiring impulse and disposition, which occurs only when something wanted is not present. The divine apostle introduced us to this doctrine also, when he predicted a cessation and conclusion of all our eager efforts, even those which are directed towards the good, but of love only he did not find a limit: for he says, 'Prophecies will pass away, and knowledge will pass away, but love never ends,' which is equivalent to being always the same.¹⁴ But when he says that faith and hope remain along with love, again he rightly puts love ahead of the others;¹⁵ for hope acts so long as the enjoyment of what is hoped for is not present, and faith in the same way becomes a support for the uncertainty of the things hoped for. This is how he defined it when he said, 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for.'¹⁶ But when the thing hoped for comes, all the others grow quiet while the operation of love remains, not finding anything to take its place. For this reason also it has the primacy among all virtuous actions as well as among the commandments of the law.¹⁷ So if the soul should ever reach this goal, it will have no need of the others, as it embraces the fullness of existing things and seems somehow alone to pre-

14 1 Corinthians 13:8.

15 1 Corinthians 13:13.

16 Hebrews 11:1.

17 Matthew 22:37-40.

serve in itself the impression of divine blessedness. For the life of the superior nature is love, since the beautiful is in every respect lovable for those who know it, and the Divine knows Itself. But knowledge becomes love, because that which is known is beautiful by nature. Insolent satiety does not touch the truly beautiful.¹⁸ Since satiety does not cut off the attachment of love to the beautiful, the divine life will always operate through love, the divine life which is beautiful by nature and from its nature is lovingly disposed towards the beautiful. There is no limit to the operation of love, since the beautiful has no limit, so that love might cease with the limit of the beautiful. The beautiful is limited only by its opposite. But whatever by its nature cannot admit anything worse will proceed towards the limitless and unbounded good."

18 Origen said that souls entered into bodies when they became sated with the heavenly life: *On first principles* 1.3.8, 2.9.2.