

Fr. Stephen C. Headley

**The Songs
of the Bridal Chamber:
Monks at Prayer**

Edited by Nikolaos Asproulis

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Melissiatika, Volos, Greece

P.O.B. 1308, Volos GR-38001, Greece

Tel. +302421093553, fax +302421077115

<http://www.ekdotikidimitriados.org> · www.acadimia.org

e-mail: ekdotiki.dimitriados@acadimia.org ·

info@acadimia.org ·

volosacademypublications@gmail.com

Facebook: Volos Academy for Theological Studies

Instagram: VolosAcademyTheologicalStudies

Twitter: @VolosAcademy1

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Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching, and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, art Thou, O our God, Through the Theotokos have mercy on us.

Troparion of Bridegroom Matins

Preface

I love those who love me, and those who seek me shall find me (*Proverbs 8:17*).

God is incomprehensible but we can describe His searching for us and our searching for Him. This modest introduction into monastic poetry describes such longing and searching. Its beauty arises from our nostalgia for our Creator, for His Father's kingdom, in the bridal chamber of our heart where Christ awaits us. Have we knocked on the door of the temple of our soul? If not, shouldn't we listen to how the monks sang, waiting patiently for the doors of their hearts to open to the grace of the Holy Spirit? For every man this is a unique and private experience but for those who enter the bridal chamber, there is a chance to share in the joy of their meeting.

Fr. Stephen C. Headley
September 2020

Chapter 10

Conclusion: There is no End to Hope in God

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? As St. Paul boldly claims, Christ will not abandon us and nor need I abandon him:

[S]hall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Rom. 8:35-39 KJV*).

The promises of God are the foundation of our hope. Through human words, promises are expressed in the language of love, wherein we are offered the possibility to accept through our faith the generosity of God. Therein lies hidden our assurance of our future Paradise. In the Old Testament, it is the “remainder” (*Daniel 7:13*) who keeps the promises; the community of Qumran restricted the privilege of the promises of God to their “observing”

members.¹ And in the New Testament, it is the Son of Man who keeps the commandments of his Father. The new Greek word for God's promises ("word"; "oath"; "benediction"; "heritage", etc.) is ἐπαγγελία (epaggelia). This word, which in Greek is very old and found in invocations to Zeus Panamaros, has no equivalent in Hebrew:

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.

But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (*Gal. 3:16-17; 25,29 KJV*).

The mysterious choice of God's "timing," revealing the far-off horizon of Paradise, seems to remain hidden, deposited in the heart of the faithful who believe in their pilgrimage:

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

¹ Cf. Marie-Léon Ramlot and Jacques Gillet "Promesses" in Xavier Léon-Dufour (dir.) *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique* (5^e édition, Paris: Cerf, 1981), pp. 1040-1041.

[...] These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. [...] By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son [...] And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: [...] God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect (*Heb. 11: 9, 13, 17, 39, 40 KJV*).

This is what St. Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, characterised as a gift of the Spirit:

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: And I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and notable day of the Lord come: And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (*Acts 2:16-21 KJV*).

In *Acts 2:39*, St. Peter calls the appearance of the Church the fulfilment of the “promise.” The Jewish law has, with the Christian, become the “book of the promises,” some seven hundred and fifty by Protestant accounts.² In St. Paul’s Epistle to the *Hebrews*, he writes:

² *Ibid*, p. 1041.

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more (8:8-12).

Now to address the second aspect of our future: what is the shape of the hope which we are given by God in these promises? Initially, the prophets announced a new peace, salvation, light and healing; in short, an enduring Paradise in which the temporal Israel is the centre of their interests. The knowledge of God (*Isaiah* 11:9) shall not leave them:

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

While *Jeremiah* (31:33-34) promises that their God will be known their hearts:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his

neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Psalms 63 and 84 say nothing less. The faith of the later Old Testament prophets, such as Daniel and the seven Maccabee brothers, hoped for the resurrection of the dead to be revealed by a Messiah at the right moment:

And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. Then I Daniel looked, and, behold, there stood other two, the one on this side of the bank of the river, and the other on that side of the bank of the river. And one said to the man clothed in linen, which was upon the waters of the river, How long shall it be to the end of these wonders? (*Daniel* 12:3-6)

The promise of the establishment of the new kingdom will be both individual and collective, temporal and spiritual, but will require purification.

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever (*Daniel* 2:44).

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages,

should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed. I Daniel was grieved in my spirit in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head troubled me (*Daniel 7:13-15*).

When, in the New Testament, we read that Jesus came and proclaimed the Kingdom of God in this world (*Mt. 4:17*), that spiritual reality was only accessible by faith, his disciples clearly did not understand why Christ had to suffer on the cross and die. Therein lies the paradox of the “already and not yet” mentioned above.

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it (*Mt. 16:24-25*).

All that we heard above from St. Maximus and St. Isaac is nothing more than counselling on how to die to this world at the same time as we sense that God is, at every moment, the abiding mercy that sustains mankind. Eternal life is not a quality that follows death, but rather a virtue that we have been given at birth by a loving creator whose Holy Spirit is instructing us how not to lose that kind of life. For St. Paul, to be without hope is to not believe in eternal life, as is the case with the pagans:

That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world (*Eph. 2:12*).

Our hope in eternal life is in Christ. By and through Christ, we experience it:

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him (*1 Th. 4:14*).

So, either we may believe that our fleeting life is now coming to an end in our near future or we can become hard realists and take the message of the angel to the Myrrhophores seriously: “Why seek you the living among the dead?” For St. Paul, such spiritual realism was the *sine qua non* of a Christian life:

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive (*1 Cor. 15:19-22 KJV*)

That the restoration of our forefather, Adam, has reopened the gates of Paradise from which he was excluded is today belittled as a myth by those who dare not believe in the life offered them in heaven. But since Christ believed in us so profoundly that he was incarnate as the second Adam, the end of the path leading onto Paradise is in our sights and we should witness to this hope, as did Peter, speaking in David’s voice:

I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence (*Acts 2:25-28*).

Taken out of context, this long chain of citations from the Epistles is very attractive, but St. Isaac and St.

Maximus, discussed above, are proposing to us an ethos, a philosophy for daily living that would allow us to keep track of when and where we are about to go astray and abandon truth. If “without Me you can do nothing,” it behoves us to take heart in Christ’s plan of salvation for all and any who open their hearts to him. By daily ascetics, by following the advice of those who have purified their hearts before us, by listening intently to those whose passionless intellect has contemplated the immensity of God’s mercy, we can hope, we can live a life worth living and do so joyfully. Shall we accept and practice this?

ON DENIAL

There exist in systematic theology proclamations called kataphatic, for they refuse to attempt to affirm the ineffable. So, in prayer and in the psalms, one speaks to the Light of Lights, the purity beyond purity. In other circumstances, revelation can be affirmed apophatically or emphatically. Sometimes contradiction exists hidden in a single word. For example, to grieve means both to mourn and to hurt someone. Hope expressed by someone in denial of his plight has now words to express it. It is a form of trust, a confidence that is shared faith one in another. Because it is unimaginable, apophatic, St. Paul expresses it as a future proleptic realization.

[...] for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ [...] (*Eph. 4:12-13* KJV).

St. Paul also describes his own plight antinomically:

As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things (2 Cor. 6:9-10).

Just as to St. Paul were revealed things that man is not allowed to describe, St. John in the cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos had an apophatic vision in which words were uttered that remain mysterious.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, Saying, I am Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:10-11 KJV).

Lest the above seem abstract in the context of our discussion of hope, I will conclude here a discussion of hope by paraphrasing Dumitru Stăniloae's closing pages of his *Fulfillment of Creation*.³ Here Stăniloae, with the aid of St. Gregory of Nyssa's theology of hope, clarifies the experience of denial and of hope.

If the opposite of the word "hope" is "denial," can one understand how denial functions psychologically in order to understand what is hope? Denial destroys the poetics of my prayer by silencing its poetic imagination. The temporality that characterises hope in the fullest sense belongs to that of the experience of Paradise. This endless eighth day is characterised by man's return to the full freedom for which he was created. Here he is who he really is; a person feels that he is created in God's image. There is no longer that permanent haunting feeling

³ Dumitru Stăniloae, *The Experience of God*, vol. 6: *The Fulfillment of Creation*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), pp. 197-207.

of a lack of fulfilment. My “I” becomes an eternal present where, paradoxically, there is no memory or hope, no past or future, for St. Gregory of Nyssa says that experience of fulfilment realises our souls’ most profound character: the desire to be free.

But free of what? Human nature spontaneously seeks to be with God for, there with him, there are no limits or boundaries. Such creation is good because it continually progresses in its participation in the divine. This infinite tension, a human movement growing in good, is still between the finite and the infinite. If God is infinite in his action, human nature must always seek the authentic direction where it can overcome its finitude. To renew the soul’s eternity requires movement on our part; this expresses our longing for God. Our finite love is always a discouraging one because it is limited by mortality, while the Eight day of rest in the infinite love of God, is an ineffable, apophatic experience, beyond limits and beyond description.

Why is our denial of Providence, of hope so desperate? It is because evil, always the devil’s, becomes desperate when there is no longer anyone to deceive because all are turning towards God. Denial is an unwillingness to commune, a powerlessness, a refusal to imagine that there is more to life than my suffering. Death occurs when man no longer has the ability to speak. Our “I” exists only in its Logos, our reason for being; the word of God expresses our Logos. Our reason searches for meaning and communion; human speech is always a response; this creates a mutual actualisation between me and my other in whom I find myself. Sin, on the other hand, deprives us of loving speech and rationality. A lie is only an apparent communion. God gives us the need to respond

to his call as a cure for sin. A person can become thus a source for loving acts to others and come out of his shell. Otherwise, our hell is a fall from the light of meaning and communion:

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint (*Isaiah 40:31 KJV*)

Such is the promise of hope for the Christian who waits on his Lord.

