

THEOSIS - DEIFICATION

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“It is not enough to leave Egypt, one must also enter the Promised-Land. Between Egypt and the Promised-Land lies a desert.” With these words, St John Chrysostomos brings to mind that enduring story from the Old Testament. The Hebrews are enslaved in Egypt, Moses helps them escape, they pass over the Red Sea, they wander for forty years, lost in the wilderness, and finally they reach the promised land. We Christians read this not just as history of past events, but also as an allegory of our own lives. Egypt is synonymous with enslavement to this world and its ways, enslavement to this material existence, enslavement to sin and death. But, St John Chrysostomo says, it is not enough to leave the figurative Egypt, to somehow escape the systems of this world... we could easily get lost in the desert. We could easily get lost in the wilderness of idols. We may follow gurus and cult-leaders, we may follow various socio-political ideologies, we may follow popular new-age movements and religions, and most common of all, we may follow our selves, our ego, into a self-centred mode of life - and that would be none other than a U-TURN, back into Egypt. No, we need to keep going, we need to make it to the Promised Land, we need to go all the way, beyond the grave to something better, to another mode of existence.

What is the ultimate purpose? Why are we here? Where are we going?

From a purely rational or scientific point of view, we are just another species of animal, we eat, we reproduce and we die. Biological death is the end of the road. But where is there *purpose* with that outlook? There is certainly *end*,... but no purpose. Purpose suggests will and choice, not just instinct and automation.

Human comes from the Latin word *humus* which means *soil*. The Greek word for human, *anthropos* refers to our upright stance. Unlike other species of animal, we stand up, we look up. We don't just look to the soil, to what is material, to food and possessions... we look to the sky, we look to the heavens, we look to what is beyond. St Gregory of Nyssa writes: “The life of humans is an endless ascent toward God, that is theosis - deification. And while Aristotle called the human *zoon politikon* (the political or social animal), St Gregory the Theologian calls the human *zoon theoumenon* (the deifying animal)... In other words, the being which is called by God to be deified.

So for us Orthodox Christians, our ultimate purpose is union with the divine... theosis. In simple terms, *theosis* is partaking in divine nature through grace. “Theosis means no more than an

intimate communion of human persons with the living God.” Some might say, “Theosis? Never heard of it. Where is it in the Bible?” Our short answer would be: “Where is the word *Bible* in the Bible?” Once that opens their mind to the possibility that some terminology can exist outside the Bible, we can give them our longer answer: “How do you understand the following phrases from the Bible?”

In the Second Letter of Peter 1:4 → that we are to become ***partakers of divine nature***. For us Orthodox Christians, that is as explicit as it can be. But there are many phrases that imply theosis - becoming one with God.

In the Letter to the Ephesians 3:19 → that we are made to be *filled with all the fullness of God*. How do you define **fullness of God** in this phrase?

In the Gospel of John 17:22-23 → where Jesus Christ himself prays the following words: “... *that they may be one as we are one; I in them and you in me...*” How do you define **oneness** in this phrase?

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians 2:16 → “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*” How do you define **rich** and **poor** in this phrase, with gold coins or dollars and cents?

In the Gospel of John 14:23 → Jesus says: “If someone loves me, they will keep my word, and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our abode with them.” What does it mean for God to make his **abode** or **dwelling** within you?

It is also made very clear in the Bible that we get a taste of this union and indwelling through Holy Communion. It is no accident that on both occasions when Jesus used the image of bread and wine, saying “I am the bread of life...” and “I am the vine...”, he goes on to describe what it means to have him abide in us, and us abide in him.

Finally, in the Gospel of John 10:34, we have a strong phrase coming from the mouth of the Lord Jesus. In a discourse with his opponents, defending his divinity, he quotes Psalm 82:6: “I say, you are gods” [...you are all children of the Most High].

But although Christ is Son of God through birth, for us Orthodox Christians, communion with God the Source, God the Word and God the Spirit means that we become children of God through adoption, by grace, it is a gift. We are not children of God through birth, but we become children of God through *adoption*. We are not gods by nature, we are humans by

nature, but we can *partake* in divine nature.

Now, having gone through many of the scriptural foundations of the concept of *theosis*, we can now better understand some of the references to *theosis* in the Philokalia. Some passages written by subsequent generations of enlightened Christians would now not seem so audacious.

St Clement of Alexandria, only a few generations after the Apostles, writes:

“The Word of God became human in order that you may learn from a human how a human may become God.”

St Basileios the Great writes:

“The human is a creature who has received the command to become god.”

St Gregory the Theologian preaches:

“We have become gods through him, for he became human for us.”

St Symeon the New Theologian explains:

“God the Word borrowed flesh from us, which he did not have by nature. He became human, which he was not. To those who believe in him, he gives his own divinity to share, which neither angel nor man had ever acquired. And humans became gods, which they were not, through adoption and grace.”

St Maximos the Confessor tells us that the very purpose of our being is theosis. That theosis is just another word for eternity, and by extension... eternal life, heaven, kingdom of heaven, salvation.

St Gregory Palamas confirms:

“The power of prayer fulfils (completes) the sacrament of our union with God... prayer uplifts and unites human beings with God.”

And finally St Peter Chrysologos sings:

*“What is more awesome...
that God gives himself to earth
or that he places you in heaven?
That he himself enters a union with the flesh,
or that he causes you to share in divinity?
That he himself accepts death,
or that he recovers you from death?”*

*It is indeed more awesome,
that earth is transformed into heaven,
that humanity is deified,
and that those whose lot has been slavery achieve dominion.”*

Next week we shall talk about the concept of SYNERGY.