

## ***DANCING WITH THE SERPENT***

One of things that seemed really odd to me as I came into the Orthodox Church was the encouragement of prayers for the dead. As a protestant I was taught that the time of life on this earth was either a time I would spend dancing or wrestling with the serpent, of which I have become quite accomplished at both! And then after we draw our last breath, the choice is over, the race is finished, and our judgment day has come!



All Christians discover that the serpent is an easy dancer and I have never once stepped on his toes, because he has none. Sometimes he leads and sometimes I choose too. His dance moves are easy and seem to flow as I waste my life away in the romance of self-gratification. When I choose to set the next dance out, a wrestling match begins. My dancing buddy becomes a poisonous, combative, jealous villain trying to pin me to the mats of eternal loneliness.

We snake handlers are the Church Militant. This wrestling match continues for us in our time on this earth. None of us know when our fight will be finished and the final bell will ring. We, whom are Orthodox in thinking, realize that our bodies will remain and die but our souls will travel to their resting place, not dead, but resting in a temporary condition. Apostle Luke tells us: *“And all were weeping and beating their breasts. But He said, **“Cease weeping; she did not die, but sleepeth.”** [Lk. 8:52]*

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The Apostle Paul tells us that immediately after the death of the body, God preserves the soul alive: *“should our earthly home of our body dissolve, we have a building by God ... a house made without hands, eternal in the heavens ... for this we also groan, yearning to be clothed with our heavenly house ... For we who are in this tabernacle groan, being burdened; not for wishing to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that the mortal one be swallowed by that which is life.”*(2 Cor. 5:1-4) And in Ecclesiastes we read: *“then shall the dust return to the earth, as it was, and the spirit shall return to God, Who gave it.”*(Ecclesiastes 12:7) The Apostle Stephen while being stoned to death offers this prayer: *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”* [Acts 7:59] And even in the Old Testament we find in 3Kings *“... and he invoked the Lord with these words: ‘Lord, my God, let the soul of this child return to it’. And it happened thus, and the child cried out.”*(3 Kings 17, 21) And also in the Book of Numbers: *“The Lord God of the spirits of every flesh.”*(Numbers 27:16)

Following our death, a particular judgment is made on where our soul spends its' time either in the company of those seeking Christ or those who are most comfortable dancing with the serpent. The resurrection of Christ eliminated the separation of the living and the dead and so they pray for us, and we pray for them. And just like all of us, those who have departed require forgiveness of sins, as that they look for a "place of rest" in the bosom of Christ and so we ask God for this and we conclude our supplication with "Lord have mercy". Since we do not know all the needs and struggles of the departed, we entrust God in His knowledge and say, "Lord have mercy."

Those whom departed in Christ are resting and are the Church Triumphant! St. Basil the Great said that for us faithful: *“death is the blessed rest that God has promised us from our labors, and we can enter it joyfully and not fearfully, because of God’s love.”* We believe that this is a temporary place and our final judgment, at the second coming of Christ, will occur when our soul is reunited with our resurrected body, so we must diligently pray for them before that day. And for ourselves with this time we have remaining, we must learn to become better wrestlers than dancers!