

AN ORTHODOX BIBLE STUDY



Working Out Our Salvation

Grace, Synergy, and Theosis in the Orthodox Church



"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

PHILIPPIANS 2:12–13

Prepared for those approaching the Orthodox Church —
how salvation is given, how it is worked out,
and how, tragically, it can be refused

A Guide Through This Study

The Orthodox doctrine of salvation cannot be reduced to a single verse or a single moment, because Scripture itself does not speak of salvation as a single moment. It speaks of it in three tenses at once — we *were* saved, we *are being* saved, we *will be* saved — and that grammar is the key to nearly every disagreement you will have with a Protestant interlocutor on this subject. This study lays out the whole shape of the doctrine: what salvation is, how it is given, how we participate in it, how the Fathers describe its goal as theosis, and — the hardest part for anyone coming from an "eternal security" background — how Scripture itself insists it can be lost.

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Orthodoxy holds two things together that Western debates usually force apart: that salvation is entirely, from first to last, the gift and work of God's grace — and that this grace never overrides the human will, but invites, awaits, and works through it. Hold both, and the doctrine of theosis, the doctrine of synergy, and the hard sayings about apostasy all fall into a single, coherent picture. Let go of either half, and the whole thing collapses into either bare legalism or bare fatalism.

What Is Salvation?

Ask an American Evangelical when he was saved, and he will almost always name a date — the day he "prayed the prayer" or "accepted Christ." Ask the New Testament the same question, and it answers in three different grammatical tenses, all at once, all true, none canceling the others.

Past — "We Were Saved"

"For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?"

ROMANS 8:24

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

EPHESIANS 2:8–9

Yes — there is a real, decisive, past-tense dimension to salvation. Baptism genuinely unites us to Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:3–4); this is not a legal fiction, and Orthodoxy never minimizes it. Something real and objective happened.

Present — "We Are Being Saved"

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18

"But he who endures to the end shall be saved."

MATTHEW 24:13

Paul's Greek here — *tois sōzomenois*, "to those being saved" — is a present passive participle: an ongoing action, not a completed one. This is the tense of the Christian life as actually lived: repentance, struggle, growth, falling, rising, being healed. This is where synergy operates, and it is the tense most flattened out of existence by "once saved, always saved" theology.

Future — "We Will Be Saved"

"Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

ROMANS 5:9–10

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

PHILIPPIANS 2:12

Notice Paul does not say "you have already worked it out." Salvation, in its fullness, remains something toward which the believer presses — culminating in the resurrection of the body and the final judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 25:31–46).

WHY THIS MATTERS

A Protestant who says "I am saved" and means "the matter is closed and cannot be reopened" is quietly collapsing all three of these tenses into the first one. Orthodoxy insists on keeping all three open at once: grace has acted, grace is acting, grace will act to completion — and the human person, by God's design, remains a real participant across all three, not merely in the first.

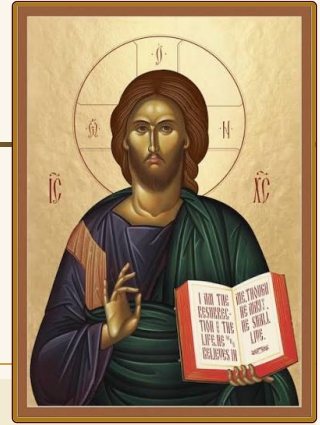
The Goal of Salvation: Theosis

If salvation is a road rather than a single step, the next question is where the road leads. The Orthodox answer, startling to most Western ears the first time they hear it stated plainly, is *theosis* — deification, real participation in the divine life and nature of God.

The Apostolic Statement

"...by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

2 PETER 1:4



Christ Pantocrator — "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25)

Peter's word here, *theias koinōnoi physeōs* — "partakers/communicants of the divine nature" — is the whole doctrine in a single verse. This is not pantheism (we do not become uncreated, or absorbed into God's essence); it is real communion with God's uncreated *energies* — His grace, life, and glory — while remaining fully, distinctly human.

Christ's Own Defense of the Language

"Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came... do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?'"

JOHN 10:34–36

Christ is quoting Psalm 82:6 (LXX Psalm 81:6 — check the Septuagint numbering in your OSB), where God addresses Israel's judges: "I said, 'You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High.'" Christ uses this text to defend His own claim to divine sonship — but in doing so, He also lets stand the principle behind it: Scripture itself, in the mouth of God, calls human beings "gods" by grace and adoption, never by nature.

The Transfiguration — Theosis Made Visible

On Mount Tabor, Peter, James, and John see Christ's humanity "transfigured before them," His face "shining like the sun" and His clothes "as white as the light" (Matthew 17:1–2). The Orthodox reading, following St. Gregory Palamas centuries later but rooted in the earlier Fathers, is that the disciples were given to see, with bodily eyes, the uncreated divine glory shining through Christ's human flesh — a preview of what grace intends for every believer united to Him. This is why the Transfiguration icon so often accompanies teaching on theosis: it is the goal of salvation rendered visible, ahead of time, on a mountain.

ST. ATHANASIUS THE GREAT, ON THE INCARNATION

In one of the most quoted lines in Orthodox theology, Athanasius sums up the whole purpose of the Incarnation: the Word of God became man so that we might become god — not by nature, as He is, but by grace, through union with Him.

— *On the Incarnation*, 54.3

ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS, AGAINST HERESIES

Irenaeus writes that the Word of God, out of His measureless love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself — the same recapitulation theme that underlies the whole Orthodox doctrine of salvation as real participation rather than mere legal pardon.

— *Against Heresies*, Book V, Preface

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, THE LIFE OF MOSES

Gregory describes the spiritual life as unending ascent, *epēktasis* — a perpetual stretching forward into the infinite God, in which the soul never reaches a static endpoint but grows from glory to glory without ceasing, because the God it seeks is Himself without limit.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- How does theosis differ from the Western Protestant picture of heaven as primarily a legal acquittal followed by eternal reward? What does it add that a purely forensic model cannot capture?
- 2 Peter 1:4 ties theosis directly to "having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" — deification and moral transformation are the same process seen from two angles. How does this reshape your understanding of your own ongoing

repentance?

How Salvation Is Obtained

Grace First, Always

Before any word is said about human cooperation, the Orthodox Church insists on the same ground Paul insists on: salvation begins entirely as gift. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). No one earns the initial approach of grace; no one summons the Holy Spirit by willpower. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).



The Resurrection (Anastasis) — Christ raising Adam and Eve from Hades

Faith and Repentance

"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

ACTS 2:38

Peter's Pentecost sermon gives the pattern the Church has followed ever since: repentance and faith are the human response that opens the door to what grace offers; baptism is where that response and that gift meet in a real, sacramental act.

Baptism — Objectively Uniting Us to Christ's Death and Resurrection

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

ROMANS 6:3–4

This is precisely what the Anastasis icon pictured here proclaims: Christ descending into the realm of death and pulling humanity — pictured in Adam and Eve — bodily out of the grave by force. Baptism is the personal application of exactly this event: each catechumen is plunged, with Christ, into death, and raised, with Christ, into new life. It is not a symbol added on top of an already-accomplished private decision; it is the sacrament in which union with Christ's own death and resurrection is objectively given.

"There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

EPHESIANS 4:4–5

Not Faith Alone, Not Works Alone

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?... Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

JAMES 2:14, 17

James is not contradicting Paul; he is completing him. Paul excludes works of the Mosaic Law as a means of earning initial justification before God (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16); James excludes a bare, inert intellectual assent that produces no fruit and calls it "faith" (James 2:19 — "even the demons believe, and tremble"). Orthodoxy has never had to choose between the two, because it never separated faith from the living, working life of grace to begin with.

ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, CATECHETICAL LECTURES

Addressing catechumens directly, Cyril describes baptism as a genuine death and burial with Christ, through which the old self is put off entirely and a new man, conformed to the Second Adam, is truly put on — language he insists is not merely figurative but a real spiritual event accomplished in the water.

Synergy — How We Participate

This is the term that separates Orthodoxy from both classical Protestant monergism (God alone acts; the will is passive or even irrelevant to the initial and ongoing fact of salvation) and Pelagianism (man saves himself by unaided effort, with grace as mere assistance). Synergy — *synergeia*, "working together" — means grace and free human will genuinely cooperate, with grace always primary, always initiating, and never coercive.

The Vine and the Branches

"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing... If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered."

JOHN 15:5–6

Notice the structure of this image with care: the branch does not manufacture its own life — the sap, the vitality, is entirely the vine's. And yet the branch can be cut off, wither, and be burned; abiding is something the branch does, or fails to do. This single image contains the whole Orthodox doctrine of grace and freedom: real dependence, and real responsibility, at the same time, without contradiction.

Philippians 2:12–13 — The Classic Text

"...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

PHILIPPIANS 2:12–13

Paul places both halves in the same two verses, deliberately. "Work out your own salvation" is an active, ongoing, effortful human task — and in the very next clause, that same working is grounded entirely in "God who works in you." Neither clause is permitted to cancel the other.

Growth in Virtue Is Commanded, Not Automatic

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness... For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure."

2 PETER 1:5–8, 10

Peter's ladder of virtues, each one built upon the last, is not decorative advice — it is placed immediately after the great theosis text of 1:4, and it makes plain that partaking of the divine nature is something believers are commanded to actively pursue, "giving all diligence," not something already finished and requiring no further exertion.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, HOMILIES ON HEBREWS

Chrysostom teaches that God does not desire to save us against our will — for then it would be a matter of compulsion, not virtue — but waits for our own will to be present as well; ours is the willing and the running, His is the granting of the power to complete the race.

ST. MARK THE ASCETIC, ON THOSE WHO THINK THEY ARE MADE RIGHTEOUS BY WORKS

Writing to correct two opposite errors, Mark insists that grace has already been given mystically, in full, at baptism — yet it is revealed and made operative in a person only to the degree that the commandments are actually kept, so that grace does not act without our cooperation, nor is our effort alone sufficient without grace already given.

THE BALANCE, STATED PLAINLY

Grace is always first, always sufficient, never earned. But grace saves a person, not a stone — and a person is precisely a being with a will. To save a human being without engaging the will would not be to save the human being at all, but to replace him with something else. Synergy is simply what it looks like for God to save persons as persons.

The Means of Grace

Synergy is not a private, invisible transaction between the individual soul and God in the abstract. The Orthodox Church teaches that God has given concrete, physical, ecclesial means through which His grace is ordinarily received and worked out — what the tradition calls the Mysteries (sacraments) and the ascetic life of the Church.

The Ongoing Priesthood of Christ



"But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them."

Christ the Great High Priest — "able to save to the uttermost" (Heb. 7:25)

HEBREWS 7:24–25

This icon pictures exactly this truth: Christ is not merely the one who accomplished salvation once, in the past, on the Cross — He is, at this moment, actively interceding, actively applying that salvation, as our Great High Priest. Salvation's "present tense" (Part I) has a Person actively at work sustaining it.

Confession — Continual Repentance

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

1 JOHN 1:9

This verse is addressed to believers, not unbelievers — John has just finished describing genuine fellowship with God (1:6–7) and now describes an ongoing, repeated pattern of confession and cleansing as the normal texture of the Christian life, not a one-time event. This is the biblical foundation for sacramental confession: sin committed after baptism is real, and so is the grace that continually meets it, through the ministry Christ gave His Church — "Whoever's sins you forgive, they are forgiven them" (John 20:23).

The Eucharist — Ongoing Communion

"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him... he who eats this bread will live forever."

JOHN 6:56, 58

Christ ties eternal life directly to a repeated, ongoing eating and drinking — present tense, habitual action — not a single past reception. This is why the Eucharist stands at the center of Orthodox sacramental life: it is the ordinary, appointed means by which "we are being saved" (1 Corinthians 1:18) week by week, not a memorial appended after salvation is already complete.

Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving

Christ assumes, rather than merely permits, that His disciples will fast, pray, and give alms as ordinary disciplines of the life of grace (Matthew 6:1–18, "when you fast... when you pray... when you give"). These are not means of earning merit before a reluctant God; they are the ascetic labor by which the will is trained to cooperate with grace already given — precisely the synergy of Part IV, made concrete and daily.

ST. JOHN CLIMACUS, THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT

Climacus describes the whole spiritual life as a ladder with thirty rungs, each virtue built upon the last, ascended only by the co-labor of strenuous human effort and the grace of God reaching down — neither the climbing nor the reaching sufficient by itself to bring the soul to the top.

Can Salvation Be Lost?

This is the hardest turn for a convert from an "eternal security" background, and Orthodoxy does not soften it, because Scripture itself does not soften it. If grace genuinely engages the will, rather than overriding it, then the will remains genuinely capable of refusal — not only before receiving grace, but after.

The Severest Warning in the New Testament

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame."



The Crucifixion — "counted the blood of the covenant... a common thing" (Heb. 10:29)

HEBREWS 6:4-6

Notice the vocabulary the author of Hebrews chooses: "enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," "partakers [*metochoi*] of the Holy Spirit," "tasted the good word of God." This is not the language of a false or nominal believer. It is the strongest language the New Testament has for a genuine experience of grace — and it is applied to people who can, in fact, "fall away."

"For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins... Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy... Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?"

HEBREWS 10:26, 28-29

This is exactly what the Crucifixion icon pictured here makes visible in paint: real blood, shed at real cost, "the blood of the covenant." Hebrews' warning is that a person who was once "sanctified" by that blood can go on to "count" it "a common thing" — to treat what purchased his life as ordinary, worthless. The warning has force only because the thing warned against is genuinely possible.

The Old Testament Precedent

"But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die."

EZEKIEL 18:24

God, through Ezekiel, explicitly rejects the idea that a genuinely righteous status, once attained, is permanently secured regardless of later unfaithfulness. The same principle carries directly into the New Covenant.

Paul's Own Fear for Himself

"But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."

1 CORINTHIANS 9:27

If the Apostle Paul — after his Damascus road conversion, after receiving the Spirit, after planting churches and writing inspired Scripture — regarded his own final salvation as something that could still be forfeited by undisciplined living, then eternal security as usually taught cannot be the New Testament's actual position.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- Hebrews 6 and 10 use the strongest possible language for genuine grace received, and still warn of real loss. What does it do to your assurance — properly understood — to hold this warning seriously rather than explaining it away?
- How does knowing salvation can be lost change how you would counsel a Christian friend who has drifted from the Church, compared to how "once saved, always saved" would counsel the same friend?

Named Examples — Those Who Fell Away

Scripture does not leave apostasy as an abstract warning; it names names. This matters in dialogue, because a Protestant interlocutor will often say every case of apparent apostasy was "never a true believer to begin with." That claim has to be tested case by case against the text's own words, not assumed in advance.

Simon Magus — Acts 8:9-24

Simon is explicitly said to have "believed" and been "baptized" (Acts 8:13) — the same verbs used of every other convert in Acts, with no textual signal of insincerity at the time. He later attempts to purchase the Holy Spirit's power with money; Peter's response is a call to repentance, not a claim that Simon was never saved: "Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you" (Acts 8:22) — language that assumes Simon is a believer who has sinned gravely and needs restoration.

Hymenaeus and Alexander — 1 Timothy 1:19-20

"...having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."

1 TIMOTHY 1:19-20

Paul says plainly that these men *had* "faith and a good conscience" and "rejected" it — the verb is *apōsamēnoi*, "having thrust away" — resulting in "shipwreck" of a faith Paul assumes was genuinely theirs to lose.

Hymenaeus and Philetus — 2 Timothy 2:17-18

Paul describes their false teaching about the resurrection as spreading "like cancer" and says they have "strayed concerning the truth" — again, a departure from a position they once genuinely held.

Demas — 2 Timothy 4:10

"...for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed..."

2 TIMOTHY 4:10

Demas appears earlier as one of Paul's trusted fellow workers (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24) — a named, known companion in ministry — before this final, sobering note that he abandoned Paul out of love for "this present world," language directly echoing 1 John 2:15's warning against loving the world.

The Galatians — Galatians 5:4

"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace."

GALATIANS 5:4

Paul is writing to genuine, Spirit-receiving believers (Galatians 3:2–3), and tells them plainly that pursuing justification by the Law results in becoming "estranged from Christ" and falling "from grace" — the single clearest phrase in the New Testament naming exactly the thing this study is about.

The Wilderness Generation — 1 Corinthians 10:1-12

Paul draws a direct typological line from Israel in the wilderness — who were "baptized into Moses," ate the same "spiritual food," and drank from the same "spiritual Rock, which was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:2–4), and yet were overthrown in the wilderness for unbelief — straight to the Corinthian church, concluding: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (10:12).

The Seven Churches of Revelation — Revelation 2-3

Christ Himself warns the church at Ephesus, already commended for its labor and endurance, that unless it repents He will "remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:5). He tells Sardis that the one who overcomes will not have his name "blotted out of the Book of Life" (3:5) — a promise that only makes sense as a real safeguard against a real possibility of being blotted out.

Categorical Warnings

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons."

1 TIMOTHY 4:1

"For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning... 'A dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'"

2 PETER 2:20, 22

ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, COMMENTARY ON JOHN

Cyril insists that the grace given at baptism is entirely real and sufficient, yet warns that it may be extinguished by later sin, in the same way a lamp genuinely lit may afterward be snuffed out — the reality of the original flame in no way guaranteeing that it cannot be put out by the one who was given it.

Answering "Once Saved, Always Saved"

Three objections come up constantly. Each rests on quietly redefining a word Scripture uses more carefully than the objection assumes.

Objection 1 — "The Spirit's Work Is Perfect, So It Cannot Fail"

The hidden premise here is that "perfect" must mean "irresistible." But a gift can be entirely sufficient and entirely genuine, and still be refused or later abandoned by the one who received it, without that being any defect in the gift or the giver. The grace given in baptism and chrismation is fully real and holds nothing back — but grace works *through* the will, per the synergy of Part IV, not around or against it. A perfect gift can still be spurned; that says something about the receiver, not a flaw in the gift.

Objection 2 — "No One Will Snatch Them Out of My Hand" (John 10:28)

"And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."

JOHN 10:28

Read the verse for exactly what it says: it promises protection from external snatching — from an outside predator seizing the sheep against their will. It says nothing at all about a sheep that willingly wanders off the pasture on its own feet. The image itself, a shepherd and sheep, assumes sheep that can stray; the promise is that no wolf can drag them away by force while they remain in the fold. This is entirely compatible with Hebrews 6, Galatians 5:4, and 2 Peter 2:20 describing sheep who leave of their own will.

Objection 3 — "A Well of Water Springing Up to Eternal Life" (John 4:14)

"...but the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

JOHN 4:14

This describes the abundant, self-renewing quality of the living water Christ gives — its sufficiency, not the impossibility of the vessel later being closed off. Nothing in the verse addresses whether the recipient can, by persistent unbelief or sin, choke off or reject a spring that continues to flow by nature. The verse describes the water's character, not an unconditional guarantee about the drinker.

The Verse Actually Says	What the Objection Adds
The Spirit's work is genuine and sufficient	...therefore it must be irresistible and unrejectable
No outside power can snatch the sheep away	...therefore the sheep cannot itself walk away
The living water is abundant and self-renewing	...therefore it cannot be refused or blocked by the recipient

THE PATTERN TO POINT OUT

In every case, the verse promises the sufficiency, genuineness, and abundance of grace — exactly what Orthodoxy also affirms without reservation. The objection works only by silently adding a second claim the text never makes: that grace, because sufficient, must also be irresistible. That second claim has to be argued from other texts — and Hebrews 6, Hebrews 10, Galatians 5:4, and 2 Peter 2:20 argue directly against it.

A Real Life of Synergy

Doctrine can feel abstract until it is seen in an actual human life, and the Church gives us Constantine precisely as a life that will not let the doctrine of synergy stay theoretical. He is instructive here for a reason quite apart from the honor paid his icon: he shows what "working out salvation with fear and trembling" looks like when it is genuinely unfinished, genuinely mixed, and genuinely still in motion until the very end.



Saint Constantine the Great — a real, imperfect life of grace and struggle

Grace at Work Long Before Baptism

Constantine's vision of the Cross before the Milvian Bridge, and his subsequent public turn toward Christ and the Church, are treated by Orthodox tradition as a real, grace-initiated conversion of will — years before his actual baptism near death. This itself is a small case study in synergy: grace clearly moved first and moved powerfully, and Constantine's cooperation — issuing the Edict of Milan in 313, convening and personally engaging with the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle the Arian crisis, reorienting an empire — was real, costly, sustained human effort offered in response, "working out" what grace had begun, exactly as Philippians 2:12–13 describes.

A Delayed, Imperfect, Yet Real Cooperation

Constantine's own baptism was delayed until he was near death — a fact historians debate the reasons for, and one the Church does not pretend is an ideal pattern to imitate. His reign, likewise, included serious moral failures within his own family. The Church's judgment on him is not that his cooperation with grace was flawless, but that it was real, sustained across decades, and oriented — however imperfectly, however slowly at points — toward Christ and His Church rather than away from it. This is precisely the "present tense" of salvation from Part I: a whole life of being saved, not a single clean moment that settled everything in advance.

The Warning Underneath the Honor

Holding Constantine's honored place in the Church calendar together with Part VI's warnings produces something important: sainthood is not proof that a person could never have fallen away, and the real possibility of apostasy in Hebrews 6 does not mean grace is fragile or God is looking for an excuse to discard anyone. Both truths sit together. Constantine's delay and imperfection are named honestly by the tradition precisely because the Church does not need to airbrush its saints to make the doctrine of grace credible — she needs only to show a real person who kept turning back toward Christ, decade after decade, cooperating unevenly but genuinely, until the end.

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, THE LIFE OF MOSES

Gregory describes the spiritual life not as a single completed achievement but as continual progress, in which the truly perfect person is precisely the one who never considers himself to have arrived, but presses on further into virtue without ceasing — a portrait that fits a whole, uneven human lifetime rather than a single decisive afternoon.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

- How does seeing salvation worked out unevenly, across an entire flawed lifetime, change the pressure you might feel to have every part of your own catechumenate feel spiritually resolved before baptism?
- What is the difference between the "delay" in Constantine's story and the "falling away" described in Hebrews 6 — what makes one a real, if imperfect, form of continued cooperation with grace, and the other a genuine rejection of it?

Questions for a Catechumen

Work through these slowly, with your OSB open, and bring what surfaces to your spiritual father rather than settling it alone at a desk.

On the Three Tenses

- Write out, in your own words, what each of the three tenses of salvation (Romans 8:24, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Romans 5:9) means for your life specifically, right now, as a catechumen not yet baptized. Which tense are you most tempted to skip past?

On Theosis

- 2 Peter 1:4–8 ties partaking of the divine nature directly to a list of virtues to be actively pursued. Pick one virtue on Peter's ladder — faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love — and name one concrete way you will pursue it this week.

On Synergy

- Where in your own life right now can you most clearly see grace as the initiator, and where can you most clearly see your own will either cooperating or resisting? Be specific and honest rather than general.

On the Possibility of Falling Away

- Hebrews 6:4–6 and Galatians 5:4 are hard texts. Does taking them seriously produce in you fear, sobriety, humility, or something else? Bring that honestly to confession or to your spiritual father rather than resolving it privately — this is exactly the kind of question the Church's sacramental structure exists to hold with you.

On the Means of Grace

- Which of the ordinary means of grace — confession, the Eucharist, fasting, prayer, almsgiving — do you currently practice with the most consistency, and which have you been most tempted to neglect as merely optional?

A CLOSING WORD FROM ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR

Maximus teaches that God, having made us in His image with a free and self-determining will, does not save us as inanimate things are moved, but waits upon our own free assent, working all things together with those who love Him and freely choose Him, so that the very virtues He grants become genuinely our own through the cooperation of our will with His grace.



A Prayer of a Catechumen

O Lord Jesus Christ, my Great High Priest, who dost always live to make intercession for me —

Thou who hast begun a good work in me, complete it; Thou who hast given the gift, teach me to work it out with fear and trembling, not by my strength alone, nor by grace apart from my willing heart, but by the two working together as Thou hast ordained;

let me neither presume upon Thy mercy as though I could not fall, nor despair of Thy mercy as though I could not rise; but keep me abiding in Thee, the true Vine, this day and every day, until Thou bring the good work Thou hast begun in me to completion in the day of Thy coming.

*Through the prayers of the Theotokos, and of all the Saints who ran the race and did not turn back,
have mercy on me and save me. Amen.*

WORKING OUT OUR SALVATION
GRACE, SYNERGY, AND THEOSIS IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH