

Defending the Faith



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April 2019

Easter: Knowing the Love of God

The one theme which stands out above all during Great Lent as we approach Easter is how much God loves us. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (John 3:16-17). God loves us infinitely more than we can imagine, and this is why He also gave us the Holy Spirit to be our comforter, and as He said, *“I will never leave you or forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5). This is the focus of our faith. We believe that God became man, so that by dying on the cross, Christ can save us, and by rising from the dead, He can offer us eternal life. Christ’s love for us draws us to Him. Why would anyone want to resist such a love?

According to John, *“the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one”* (1 John 5:19). That is a powerful force, which comes against us. The “wicked one” only knows how to lie, hate and destroy. This means that we need to be able to discern truth from among all the world’s lies. The truth is that Jesus is God and He loves each and every one of us. When we fully understand that truth, we cannot help but be in awe of what God has done through His Son. Christ was not just some man who happened to be executed because He wanted to be King of the Jews. Jesus was the only human who was perfect, never having sinned even once. He was pure goodness and love. Christ demonstrated His divine power through amazing miracles, including raising people from the dead. He often performed these miracles with thousands of witnesses present. Christ was God, who humbled Himself and willingly accepted crucifixion because He loves each and every one of us and wants us to be with Him for eternity.

As Christians, it is our responsibility to develop our spiritual maturity by cultivating a relationship with Christ. The best way to do that is through prayer, or in other words, just talk to Jesus. Prayer is the most available means to cultivate our relationship because it is always accessible, no matter where we are. Your prayers do not have to be too long or involved. Just express what is on your heart.

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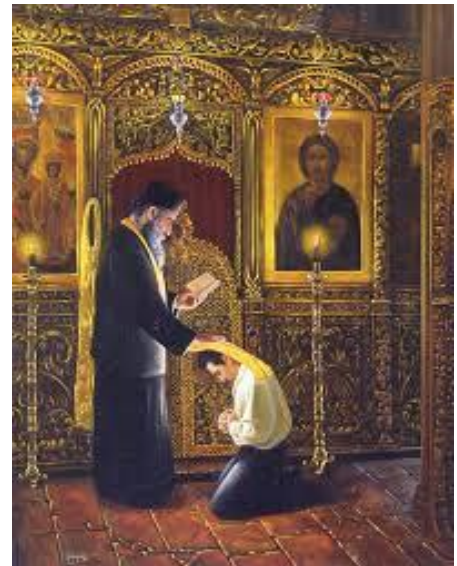
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Easter: Knowing the Love of God (cont'd)



Holy Communion



Holy Confession

Another way to develop our spiritual maturity is by participating in the Sacraments, especially taking Communion. The whole purpose of Communion is to receive remission of sins and to be united with Christ. It is a mystical union, which we experience through the Holy Spirit. Receiving the Eucharist is one way we energize the Holy Spirit within us, who brings us closer to God. During Lent, we should also participate in Confession. I have to confess, myself, that until this last year, I had only gone to Confession once in my life. I was terrified, especially because there were decades of sins I had never confessed. If you have reservations, one thing I can tell you is that only by facing a human being, like a priest, do we truly feel repentant of our sins. Confessing to a God who we cannot see is easy! I genuinely experienced the love of God when I participated in Confession and knew my sins had been forgiven.

We can also develop our spiritual maturity by remembering what we ourselves say each time we recite the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Preparing for Easter requires us to forgive all those who have sinned against us and hurt us. After all, by reciting the Lord's Prayer, we are basically telling God to only forgive our sins, *if* we forgive others. That means, God may not forgive our sins. Before approaching a person who you need to forgive, spend some time thinking about your own sins. Ask yourself if you committed similar sins, and maybe even committed those same sins against the same person. If you really think about it, none of us is any better than someone else. We have all sinned. That is exactly why we must forgive others their sins. We show them compassion by forgiving them. Reconcile with anyone you are estranged. This may also mean that you must ask someone for forgiveness yourself.

When you have prepared yourself during Lent, Easter will be much more joyous! In our Orthodox tradition, we spend Holy Week at church, attending services that recreate the events of

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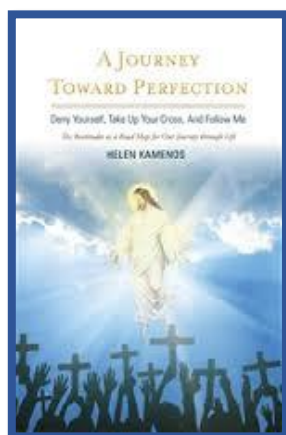
Easter: Knowing the Love of God (cont'd)

Christ's betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. The prayers and Bible passages are intended to remind us of the sacrifice Christ made for us. They are intended to put us in the right frame of mind, so that when Easter arrives, we have a deeper understanding of why we are so thankful that God offered us a way to Heaven. The Orthodox services during Holy Week are unique to our faith, particularly the services on Holy Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. On Thursday, Christ is placed on the cross. On Holy Friday afternoon, He is taken down from the cross, and in the evening, we follow in a funeral procession to bury Him in His tomb. On Saturday morning we joyfully anticipate the Resurrection and at midnight we jubilantly sing "Christ is Risen," while a darkened church is set alight by the flames of our candles. We experience the joy of Easter by reliving it!



I pray that this will be the most blessed Easter that you have ever experienced!

Helen Kamenos
Readers' Favorite Author



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By Helen Kamenos

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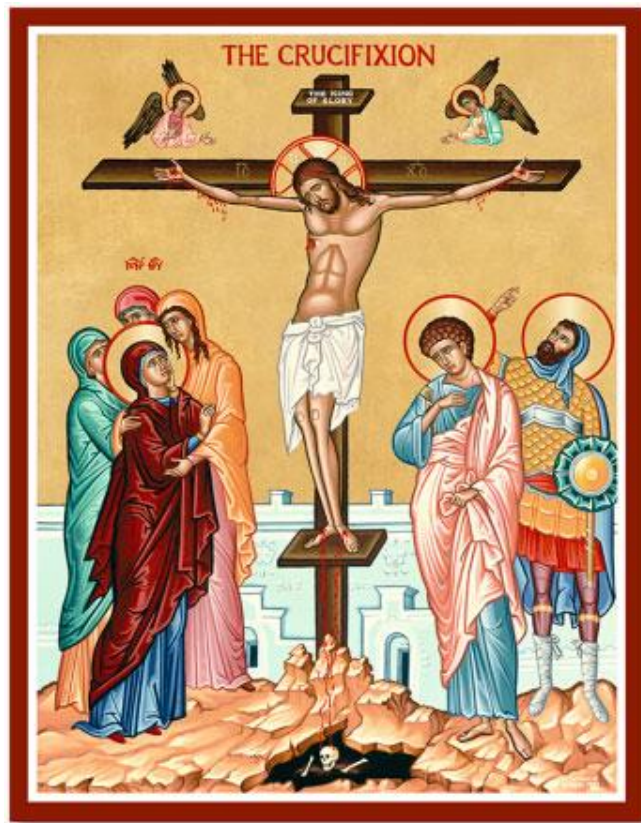
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The Crucifixion of Christ (Matthew 27:27-54)



27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29 and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. 31 After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

32 As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. 33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), 34 they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. 35 And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; 36 then they sat down there and kept watch over him. 37 Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. 39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." 41 In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" 44 The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

45 From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." 48 At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. 49 But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." 50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. 51 At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

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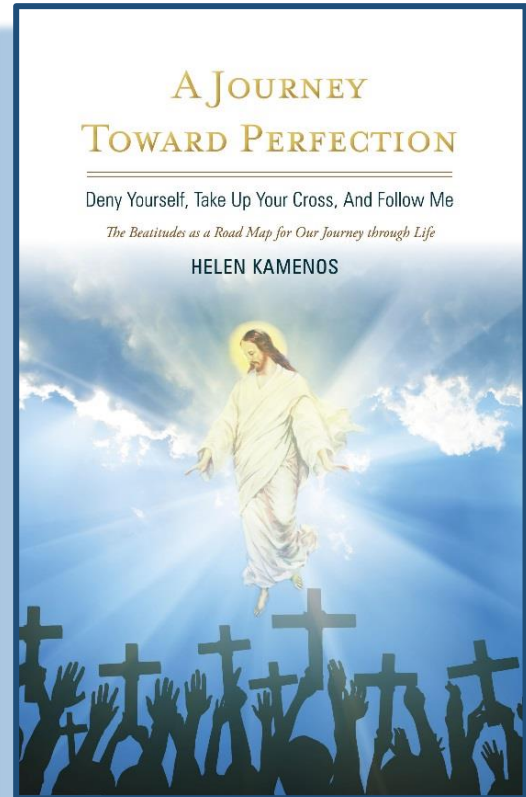
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A Journey Toward Perfection

A *Journey Toward Perfection* reveals a path toward developing an intimate experiential relationship with God. It is an in-depth study of the attributes of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. These are the attributes God bestowed upon us when He created us in His image. God created us to love. These are the traits necessary to love others as God loves us. These characteristics are central to our Christian spiritual growth. Discover how these attributes can sustain you through the many trials and tribulations of your life. Comprehend how love truly conquers all. Experience God's true presence in your life.

The Beatitudes from Matthew 5:

- ³ *Blessed are the poor in spirit,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- ⁴ *Blessed are those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted.*
- ⁵ *Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.*
- ⁶ *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be filled.*
- ⁷ *Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall obtain mercy.*
- ⁸ *Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God.*
- ⁹ *Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God.*
- ¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- ¹¹ *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*
- ¹² *Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*



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