

Tollhouses

The subject of Tollhouses is certainly not new. This idea has been around since the 2nd century in the writings of Tertullian, Ignatius, and Origen and certainly by the majority of the Holy Fathers of the 3rd – 5th centuries.

It is told that the blessed Theodora of Constantinople in the 10th century when she died had her soul escorted by angels to heaven passing by 20 aerial tollhouses. The demons brought forth scrolls detailing her sins but when the scrolls were unrolled all the writings had vanished. When Theodora asked the angel how was this possible he answered saying that her sins were forgiven and erased through true repentance, prayer, fasting and good works.

More recently the idea of tollhouses has been popularized in the 1980 book by Fr Seraphim Rose, *“The Soul after Death.”*

In chapter 6 Fr. Seraphim discusses at length the Aerial Tollhouses defined as the place where the newly departed souls encounter angels, both divine and demonic and where an “accounting” of the soul’s sins versus their virtues takes place as the soul attempts to reach heaven. These tollhouses are overseen by demons who examine the soul in relation to the sins in question, while the soul’s guardian angel brings forth evidence of virtue and repentance thus modeling the human justice system. If the guardian angel produces evidence of good actions which outweigh the evil accomplished then the “toll” is considered paid.

What makes this topic so controversial is whether this “tollhouse” idea should be taken literally or is this just a horrifying metaphor used by the Fathers of the Church to rouse early Christians from their complacency and motivate them to repent for the sins they have committed before it is too late.

There can be no doubt that all the Church Fathers spoke about life after death and the experiences of the soul. However this was not to establish the precise method of judgement of souls after death but to stress the importance of properly preparing ourselves through prayer and repentance for the Dreaded Final Judgement by Christ.

With regards to the theology of Aerial Tollhouses, Cambridge professor Vasileios Marinis, in his 2017 book, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art* addresses this saying,

“...for all their reputed and professed preoccupation with the afterlife, the Eastern Church never produced a systematic theology on the postmortem fate of the soul. Or, rather, they did so only in the 15th century, under duress at the

Council of Ferrara-Florence, whose goal was the union of the Byzantine and Latin Churches.

One reason for this [lack of systematic theology] is that the Bible provides relatively meager and sometimes contradictory information on the matter. In neither the Old nor the New Testament do we find a fully developed description of the afterlife.”

It was during these Middle Ages that we see the Eastern Church developing a more systematic theology, in response to the Catholic theologies of purgatory and Partial Judgement.

Some mistakenly believe that St Mark of Ephesus, who defended the Orthodox Church at the Council of Florence, supported the idea of tollhouses as part of Orthodox theology, as is hinted in by Fr. Seraphim in his book.

However, St. Mark, in his defense against the idea of purgatory, did not mention tollhouses nor did he detail the mechanism of the sufferings or purification in the afterlife, but only said that “the souls of people who die with unforgiven minor sins will experience spiritual sufferings in the afterlife, which, however, are not divine punishments but self-inflicted consequences of these sins.”¹

St. Mark and the other Orthodox at the Council insisted that the newly-deceased fall into three categories: the perfect or sinless, who receive a foretaste of heaven; those guilty of grave sins, who receive a foretaste of hell; and those in the middle who are guilty of minor sins and hence are in need of purification which can be accomplished by the prayers and memorial services of the Church.

Scriptural References

Supporters of the tollhouse theology reference both Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament from which they say form the basis for the idea of tollhouses.

Old Testament

The balance and scales of justice are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are His work.

Proverbs 16:11

O Lord, You have brought my soul from the grave; You have revived me from my descent into the Pit.

¹ Fr. Demetrios Bathrellos, “The Debates on Purgatory and the Forgiveness of Sins at the Council of Ferrara-Florence,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 65, 1 (2014), 78).

Early Jewish belief was that Sheol was the place of eternal rest without a definitive afterlife, however in later writings (2nd century BC) under the Hellenistic influence we find the addition of a defined afterlife such as in the Book of Daniel.

And many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awaken-these for eternal life, and those for disgrace, for eternal abhorrence. And the wise will shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who bring the multitudes to righteousness like the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:2-3

A more fully developed theology of afterlife, judgement, and resurrection are found in the Apocryphal books such as 2 Esdra, Maccabees, and Ecclesiasticus.

New Testament

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazaros (Luke 16:19–31). After death the soul of the rich man and the soul of Lazaros have different fates. While Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, the rich man finds himself in Hades. Although no judgment is mentioned, Abraham's response to the rich man's plea suggests that, based on their conduct, each received his due judgement.

The balance of source texts for toll house comes from St. Paul in his writing in Romans, Corinthians, and Philipians. In Ephesians 2 he even mentions the "Prince of the air..."

Development of the Tollhouse Theology

Throughout Scripture we are told about tax collectors who would sit along the roads and extract from travelers the money they believed was due to them. The overturning of the tables by Christ spoke of His anger against those who extorted money from the poor and wealthy alike. The church fathers saw in this a metaphor of the demonic encounters the soul will have after death, which is why even St. John Chrysostom referred to these demons as "persecutors, publicans, and tax-collectors."

Iconography of these times evens depict the image of what happens in the toll houses. Scrolls containing good deeds and the bad deeds with scales being held by either the hand of God or an angel.

Later many Russian saints and clergy wrote about tollhouses and they are even referenced in the Philokalia.

More recently the idea of tollhouses has been popularized in the 1980 book by Fr Seraphim Rose, "The Soul after Death" and "*The Departure of the Soul according to the Teaching of the Orthodox Church*," published by St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona,

both of which convey the message that the doctrine of the “toll-houses” is indeed a teaching of the Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

As Fr. Jeremy of Orthodox Road notes, *“In the West, and especially in America, we have been thoroughly indoctrinated with the idea of “Blessed Assurance,” that is, both Heaven and salvation are done and completed for us, ie. “Once saved always saved.” Salvation is assured as long as we have accepted Jesus into our hearts as Lord and Saviour.”*

Such simplistic ideas, plus the dominant idea that justice must be served is deeply ingrained in our culture, and we bring these ideas with us into Orthodoxy.”

Metropolitan Iepotheos of Nafpaktos agrees that the Fathers of the Church adopted of the idea of aerial tollhouses but cautioned that they tempered their writings to avoid a literal interpretation which was promoted by the heretical teachings of the Gnostics.

The Metropolitan offers us four (4) important considerations when interpreting the writings of the Fathers concerning tollhouses.

1. We must be cautious when interpreting Scripture to distinguish between the Gospel writers use of symbology versus actual events to avoid reading improper theological meaning.
2. Demons have no power over those who belong to God, ie. The Body of Christ. And while the demons can tempt and accuse a person, the demons have neither the authority nor ability to hold them.
3. The demons are not the judges. Jesus Himself tells us that “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”
4. Good deeds and virtues, while displays of Christian love don’t save us. Salvation is accomplished through repentance and God’s mercy. Our goal in life is a process of purification, illumination, and theosis.