

Eternity Divided: Gregory of Nyssa's Division of "Time" after Death in his Homilies

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental difference lies in Gregory's presentation of the afterlife in his treatises and in his homilies. What they do have in common is that they allude to a period of post-mortem purification in preparation for entering paradise. Whereas in the treatises, all souls undergo this purification since all will eventually be saved (as best explained in *An et Res*), in the homilies – which are the object of this study – this purification is reserved only for those who will be granted salvation, while unrepentant sinners will be damned to eternity in hell. The time-frame between the moment of death and the admittance into eternal bliss in God's presence can be interpreted as the interim period between individual judgement (which occurs at the moment of death) and universal judgement/apocatastasis (which happens at the end of time). This intermediary period of time is presented in different ways in the homilies: some are admitted to paradise immediately owing to their virtuous lives, others must undergo purification since they are still disposed towards earthly desires (e.g. *Eccl I*). In other homilies, paradise itself is divided into different parts (two in *Bapt*, four in *Cant XV*), implying there is a distinction even among those who have achieved salvation. Eventually, all those who have not been sentenced to eternal punishment, will share the same bliss, after the event of the apocatastasis.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the different ideas the Nyssen shares with his audience, regarding the different stages of perfection which the soul undergoes, once it exits earthly life and starts living in eternity.

[603] Eternity divided:

Gregory of Nyssa's division of "time" after death in his homilies

Eschatology in homilies and treatises: is there a difference?

In a previous study¹ I explained the different positions Gregory of Nyssa presents on the eternal state of human nature after death in his treatises and in his homilies. The conclusions were that keeping to his treatises and to selected references found in a minority of homilies Gregory, as a philosopher, affirmed the salvation of all who partake of human nature; however, taking the homilies as the primary source it emerged as absolutely clear that the Nyssen does not offer certainty on universal salvation. The possibility of an eternity in hell is present as much as that for an eternity in paradise.

While he does not get into too much depth when discussing the fate of the damned – they shall go to hell and stay there, *tout court* – while speaking of eternity in paradise in several of his homilies the bishop of Nyssa imparts curious details as to how this endless time will be divided for those who are saved.

Hence, when speaking of the concept of 'time' after death, treatises and homilies present different options. Whereas in the former he speaks of a basic bipartite distinction in eternity, basically stating that there is a time of purification and then an eternity of bliss, in the homilies the possibilities are more varied: there is the possibility of an unchanging condition for the damned, in other cases we notice a distinction between a time of purification and eternal bliss, and also, in the case of the saved, sometimes he alludes to three different stages wherein after a time of purification the soul is allotted for a period of time (till the Parousia) to a place which corresponds to its faithfulness in life and eventually it will reach the heights of perfect bliss.

¹ Jonathan Farrugia, *aJmartiva in the homilies of Gregory of Nyssa*, doctoral thesis, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Roma 2016.

[604] In this present study I shall be discussing in more detail the different scenarios in which the soul may find itself after it departs the body and the 'time' it spends in these different milieus.

Punishment: temporal or eternal?

Gregory always speaks of punishment in relation to the problem of evil: souls are punished after they are separated from their bodies because of the evil they have committed in their lives. Even though, as we said, sometimes the bishop of Nyssa presents different conclusions, there are some concepts on which his opinion never changes, and one of these concerns the impermanence of evil: evil is not eternal and thus it will come to an end², it will be reduced to nothing³ in creation as well as in its own essence. In the consolation speech on the occasion of the death of princess Pulcheria he explains that since evil is embedded in human life, once this comes to an end, so will evil⁴. The thorny issue here is: what does the bishop believe that will become of those who lead evil lives?

The treatise *On the soul and resurrection* presents one of Gregory's most detailed explanations of the afterlife; it would be worthwhile to see what he says in this regard in this treatise as well. According to his sister the whole of the human race is destined to regain its original state in which God created human nature at the beginning⁵. Macrina does not deny that many people conduct evil lives, but still she believes that these will necessarily go through a period of purification by fire after death, in order to attain the glory they were destined for. The duration of the post-mortem purification will depend on how much the person in question was removed from virtue, but still the certainty that all will eventually share in the supreme Good which is God is never put into question⁶.

² εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν περιστήσεται (*Cant VII*, 209, 13).

³ τὸ κακὸν εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν ἀφανίσεσθαι (*Cant XIV*, 421, 14).

⁴ *Pucher*, 472, 2-10.

⁵ *An et Res*, PG XLVI, 145B et seq.

⁶ *An et Res* PG XLVI, 149B et seq., 157B-160C.

Nonetheless, when speaking of hell in the homilies Gregory, as we said, introduces the possibility of an eternity of punishment. The bi-partite distinction in time during this state of suffering can be distinguished as: (a) from the moment of death till the last judgement, when only the soul will be tormented, and (b) from the last judgement onwards, when even the body will be introduced to the agonies. In most of the cases, as we shall see, this idea of eternity is understood thanks to the vocabulary (especially verbs and adjectives) used by the author to describe the conditions in this state of suffering.

The Nyssen's idea of the eternity of hell can already be perceived in his earliest homilies, those on the beatitudes. In the third homily hell is referred to as πῦρ μὴ [605] σβεννύμενον καὶ ἀτελεύτητον σκώληκα⁷; the middle present participle sbennuvmenon implies a continuing action while the adjective ajteleuvthton denotes a certain permanence, hence indicating eternity. In the fifth homily Gregory uses for the first time the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, which will be used in several later homilies to prove indirectly the eternity of hell. Here the rich man is said to be found in a place where his pleas for pity are unheard⁸; the participle οὐκ ἀκουόμενος denotes a continued, eternal, action; in none of the homilies where this parable is mentioned do we find any indication of the coming of a time when these unheard pleas will finally be heard.

During the same period the Nyssen delivered the homily on the sixth psalm, and here, once again, his language points to the eternity of hell. Gregory mentions an afterlife education which consists of a terrible punishment for those who in life pursued an ungodly conduct⁹; no time frame is allotted for this education. Then there is mention of an immortal worm (ἀτελεύτητος σκώληξ) that eats away the soul by remorse¹⁰. The details can be considered to be quite clear: the worm is described as ἀτελεύτητος, healing for past transgression can no longer (οὐκέτι) be found after

⁷ *Beat III*, 100, 26-27.

⁸ *Beat V*, 130, 22.

⁹ *Sext ps*, 190, 22-27.

¹⁰ *Sext ps*, 190, 17-18.

death¹¹, those who do not control their passions can despair for not being saved¹²... it all adds up to confirming the eternity of this state of torment.

In the homily against those who practice usury the preacher speaks of an eternal grief (αἰωνίου λύπης) which will befall these people¹³.

The first homily where the bipartite distinction in the time of eternity in the case of the damned is mentioned clearly is the earliest Easter homily. Taking once more into consideration the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Gregory speaks of the final resurrection which everyone will go through, wherein all souls will be reunited to their bodies in order to be judged. Thus whatever lies beyond the final judgement will not only be of a spiritual nature, but has also a physical dimension¹⁴. Hence from this detail we understand that there will be a change in state that takes place at a specific time, namely the Parousia.

A curious detail which is found in only one homily – the one against those who postpone their baptism – concerns the destiny of the good people who die without being baptized. Their souls seem to be condemned to remain errant, seeking a place for repose without ever finding one¹⁵. The terms ὀδυρομένην ἀνόνητα καὶ μεταμελουμένην ἄπρακτα (uselessly lamenting and being sorry) indicate [606] that some degree of suffering is present, and this will be eternal since the soul will not find the resting place it is looking for. The term ἀνόνητα does not leave much room for other interpretations. For a moment we could be led to think that Gregory is here suggesting a kind of “intermediary hell” for the non-baptized who, nonetheless, are not evil-doers; but it seems that he had second thoughts for he says, immediately after, that these will share the same destiny as the rich man who lived in luxury, and like him they will be ὕλην τοῦ ἀσβέστου πυρός (wood for the unquenchable fire)¹⁶.

¹¹ *Sext ps*, 191, 23-25.

¹² *Sext ps*, 192, 3-9.

¹³ *Usur*, 196, 18.

¹⁴ *Sanct Pasch*, 265, 18-20.

¹⁵ *Bapt*, 364, 5-9.

¹⁶ *Bapt*, 364, 11.

More vocabulary related to the eternity of punishment is found in the homily against those who do not accept correction¹⁷. Here Gregory says that the souls of the excommunicated will bear a sign (τὴν ψυχὴν τὰ τοῦ ἀπορισμοῦ φέρουσιν σύμβολα)¹⁸ and, seeing this, the doorkeepers of the kingdom will not grant them pass. The destiny of these wretched souls is to stay in some sullen place (σκυθρωπῷ τόπῳ) where they will for eternity (εἰς αἰῶνας) blame themselves for their thoughtlessness, lamenting and wailing, paying in full for their misdeeds.

The second homily on the love for the poor is the only case where Gregory mentions the detail where the rich man demands that someone from the land of the dead goes to warn his brothers about their impending doom if they do not change their ways¹⁹. If the place of torment where the rich man is found were transitional, then there would have been no need to alert his brothers, for eventually it would come to an end. The very fact that he wants to advise them to avoid it at all costs proves that once a soul enters that state it cannot leave it.

Gregory's use of language determines the permanence of punishment even in the Christmas homily: when evil will have completely disappeared, at the end of time, and all will be called back to life²⁰, the good will go to a celestial abode while sinners will be sent to the fires of Gehenna in order to be cleansed (ἐκκαθαρθέντων). Even though cleansing gives the impression that it is a process which will eventually come to an end, since Gregory says this will happen at the moment of the final resurrection when all will receive their deserved share, there is not much room for a further change in condition. Hence we can say that for the bishop of Nyssa this cleansing in the fires of Gehenna is an eternal process.

The only opposing idea to all this said in the homilies can be found in the in the homily on the dead. Here Gregory once again divides the period of the afterlife in

¹⁷ *Cast* 328, 5-7.

¹⁸ *Cast* 328, 11.

¹⁹ *Quat uni*, 123, 14-18.

²⁰ *Diem nat*, 244, 13-15.

two stages and this time he presents a different scenario for the damned. As was the case with the first Easter homily, first there is the phase between death and the end of time, and then there is the eternal phase from the end of time onwards. In the case of those who during their lifetime choose to follow evil, their souls will [607] be sent to the purifying fire where they will understand the true nature of good and crave for it. At a certain point Gregory states that he who uses the garments of skin as an accomplice to do evil will find his place in this purifying fire where:

it will be useless for him to decide to turn towards the good after he has left his body; he will measure the difference between virtue and vice for he will not be able to share in divine life without having first had his soul washed from the dirt mixed to it in the purifying fire. (*Mort*, 56, 3-7)

Here we understand that the place of purification is temporary. The soul will remain in the state of purification till it is made spotless and then it will access bliss. In this case, therefore, hell is an intermediary state of unspecified time where other-worldly purification is possible. This however remains an isolated instance in Gregory's homilies as in all the others when he speaks of hell he uses clear terminology that points to its eternity.

Paradise: a variety of 'times' and 'scenarios'

References to paradise are much less regular, and the insight the bishop of Nyssa gives about what celestial life essentially consists of differs from one homily to the next. When it comes to discussing paradise problems arise, especially since Gregory presents different environments to be found within this state of bliss.

A first difficulty we can present regards the stages of divine judgment on the soul. Analysing the homilies we note that the bishop makes reference to two kinds of post-death judgment: there are times when he speaks about the judgment made on individual souls at the moment of their death, generally discussing whether they will be granted entrance into paradise or not (as in the homilies against those who

don't accept correction and those who postpone their baptism); other times he speaks about the universal judgment when all souls will be given their due (as in the homily against those who practice usury and the two on the love for the poor). This judgment will be final and unchanging.

Speaking of the saved souls he denotes a difference in state before and after universal judgement; and a difference in state can also be noted in this latter timeframe.

A somewhat complex description, quite unique, is the one found in the homily against those who postpone their baptism²¹. Here, after having said that only the baptized may enter heaven, the bishop divides paradise in two parts. There is the part which welcomes those who have lived a good life after their baptism. Then there is the other part, like a "hall of the unworthy" which is reserved for those [608] who are neither worthy to be praised nor worthy to be condemned²². The latter are those who delay their baptism till the last moments of their lives. This is the only occasion where Gregory mentions this kind of division in paradise alluding to a group who will be granted a kind of limited entrance due to their unworthiness:

they suppose that the kingdom will be opened immediately for them, and that they will receive some place full of wonderful goods and that they will themselves be deemed worthy of honours equal to the just. This is some sort of empty hope, which bewitches the soul to believe lies. [...] he who abandons the perfections of virtue through laziness is not free of punishment and condemnation, if at any rate the bad will and the hatred of good things are brought to judgement, clearly that bears the conviction of iniquity. (*Bapt*, 367, 3-7. 16-20)

I believe the bishop is here alluding to some kind of negation from fully participating in heavenly bliss, even within the boundaries of paradise itself. He does not specify whether this is temporary or eternal.

Yet another distinction in paradise can be found in the final homily on the *Song of Songs*. Acknowledging that not everyone is able to reach the same level of perfection during their lifetime, the bishop says that God has prepared a place in His

²¹ *Bapt*, 367, 10-11.

²² *Bapt*, 367, 11-12.

household corresponding to the degree of each individual's inclination to the good²³. This implies, therefore, that there will be a different abode for each person according to his or her level of perfection achieved in life²⁴ which will reflect his participation in happiness from the moment of his entrance into paradise till the last judgement:

One person, who is rising as it were from the depths of a life of vice toward participation in the truth, now stands at the threshold of the nobler inheritance. To another, who is earnest and zealous, there has already accrued a nobler good. Yet another, out of lust for good things, has grown even further than this. Here is one who is at the midpoint of an ascent of the heights, while another has passed the very midpoint, and there are some who have surpassed even these, others who have overtaken the latter, and above these still others strain forward in their upward course. And, in short, God receives each individual into the proper rank, in accordance with the many different sorts of choices that are made, and allots to all severally what corresponds to their desert, at once matching to the more advanced and measuring out to the less advanced the recompense of good things that is theirs. (*Cant XV*, 459, 7-460, 2)

Furthering his discussion he divides those who are saved into four categories: the multiple maidens, the eighty concubines, the sixty queens and the single dove. [609] These will all be saved because they have believed in the salvific words of the Christian mystery²⁵, however their different dispositions will mark a different place in paradise. Gregory ends the homily by saying that all distinction between maidens, concubines, queens and the dove, will eventually be erased when all of them will acknowledge the blessedness of the dove and thirst to become like her. This is the final transformation which will happen after death, which will be at the time of the Parousia:

So if the daughters pronounce the dove blessed, they too are desiring to become doves; and if the concubines and queens praise the dove, this is a token that they too are eager for that which is worthy of praise—until that time when, since all have become one in desiring the same goal and there is no vice left in any, God may become all in all persons, in those who by their oneness are blended together with one another in the fellowship of the Good in our Lord Jesus Christ [...](*Cant XV*, 468, 20-469, 8)

So here the state of some souls before and after universal judgment will change: at the moment of death they are sentenced to paradise but without somehow

²³ *Cant XV*, 459, 5-7.

²⁴ *Cant XV*, 459, 7-460, 2

²⁵ *Cant XV*, 460, 17-18.

enjoying completely its bliss since this is reserved only to the perfect ones (the “dove”); after the universal judgment they will be promoted to full enjoyment with those who are already there. The intermediary time frame between the two judgments can be interpreted as another form of afterlife purification within the boundaries of paradise, but which, of course, lacks suffering.

Conclusion

It is no easy task stating how Gregory perceived the division of time after death. What is certain is that in all cases – be it salvation or damnation – the bishop generally divides time into two specific periods: before the universal judgement and after.

In the case of the damned the difference will be that from a state of spiritual suffering they will pass to one of physical suffering; in the case of the saved, apart from the introduction of the body, those who have a kind of limited access to perfect bliss will eventually pass on to enjoy it in its fullness. From what we read in his homilies eternity may be divided in two different ‘times’, where the first period can have multiple ‘scenarios’.

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