

St. Nephon of Constantiana: How Souls Travel to Heaven



*St. Nephon the Wonderworker of Constantia
(Eastern province of Cyprus) (4th century), celebrated Dec 23.*

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Once when he was praying and had his gaze turned to Heaven, a divine light shone in front of him. At the same time a white-clad angel, dressed as a deacon, appeared. He was holding a gold censer and censed first in the direction of Heaven and then Nephon. Suddenly the gates of Heaven opened and the angels of God

ascended and descended like bees, transporting the souls of people who had died. The evil spirits of the air were struggling to grab them and throw them down, but the angels resisted violently, whipping them and saving the souls.

Astonished the saint saw a soul being taken up to heaven. But as soon as they approached the toll booth of immorality, its leader started to shake and become wild. “With what right,” he was shouting, “do you take that soul which belongs to us?”

And the angels answered him: “Prove to us what authority you have over this man.”

“Up until his death,” the demon said, “he was wallowing voluntarily in all kinds of indecencies. And not only this, but he also judged others. What crimes more horrible than these do you want?”

“Yes,” the angels admitted, “he was a slave to these passions , but he cut them before he died.”

“No! It’s not the way you’re telling me,” the demon squealed. “He died unrepented. To his last breath he violated the law without ever confessing his sins. He was and still is mine.”

Then one of the angels said: “We are not about to believe you, who are entirely wallowing in falsehood. Let’s call his angel. He will tell us the whole truth.”

They called him, because he was still guarding the body until its internment. As soon as he came, they asked him: “Tell us , brother, did this soul repent for its sins or did it die with them? Tell us the whole truth.”

Then the angel answered: “I am neither human nor an impudent spirit to tell lies, but before God I assure you: from the time he became ill, even before he took a turn for the worse, he thought of death. Then he began to cry and confess his sins to God. Continually he would raise his hands toward the Most High asking for

mercy. If God will, He will forgive him. If not, glory to His righteous judgment!”

As soon as the angels heard this, they laughed at the devil. thus the humble soul was liberated from the snares of its enemies.

In a little while the saint saw another soul being carried up. It belonged to a blasphemous and hard man. The demons were accusing him a lot reminding him one-by-one of the improper words and grave curses he used to say to the people when he was alive.

The angels said in rebuttal that he had a few rights to salvation. Many times, for example, even thou he was thinking of doing something bad, he would immediately repent, reproaching and degrading himself. Often he would sigh bitterly and sometimes he would tear. Once in a while he would even give a little charity to the poor. Having this in mind, the angels of light claimed that God would have mercy on that soul. Angered then the demons said: “From his youth he did things that were not right for a Christian: He polluted himself with different sins and, indeed, sodomitic ones. Where shall we place his curses and anger? And the worst, he even committed murder. If therefore he must be saved, then take the whole world and all the sinners of the earth and save them gratis; because we are laboring and getting upset in vain!”

“Keep in mind, wretches, that he cut all his youthful sins and God forgave him. And if sometimes he did something, be cleansed it with repentance. What do you want then, wild beasts? that his soul be condemned? Impossible, since God forgives the sins people confess tearfully and humbly and do not repeat. *Anything that becomes visible is light.* The righteous Judge punishes only those sins they take with them.

Thus the angels defeated the spirits of wickedness and entered into the gate of Heaven. Therefore, that creature of God was also liberated from the claws of the demons, and He Who saves freely, granted him salvation.

Again the blessed one saw them lifting still another soul that was very devout and

God-fearing. She spent all her life in purity, modesty, and a great deal of charity. She showed love toward all. The dragons of the air threatened her, gnashing their teeth. And that poor thing, terrified by their wildness, shriveled up in the bosom of the angels of God, while the angels descending to take up other souls kissed her with love.

When that holy soul ascended into heaven, a large number of good spirits gathered around her, embracing and kissing her tenderly, and saying joyfully: “Glory to God Who delivered this soul from the dreadful dragon!”

It was a delight to see them. The heavenly powers always do this: they rejoice and celebrate for each Christian who is saved. When they reached the throne of Grace, they brought her to the feet of the Lord Jesus, and he permitted her to worship His Father and to be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Later He turned her over to Michael, the lord of the covenant, to guide her to eternal rest, as indeed it happened.

Down further, however, the servant of God saw the demons dragging a soul to the infernal regions. It was the soul of some servant who had hung himself. Behind him followed his guardian angel weeping bitterly for his loss. In the midst of his tears he was saying: “Ah, the foxy demons who make people do such evil! There, this servant’s master, obeying the demons, would become angry, hit him terribly, and let him starve to death. And this poor soul became desperate, took the rope and hung himself, offering his life wholly a sacrifice to Satan. Ah, alas! The Almighty gave him to me to guard after his baptism, and the filthy dragon snatched him from me suddenly and devoured him! How will I appear to my Lord in this grieving and bitter state? But also, how will I face my Maker sorrowful for the loss of this soul?”

While he was painfully saying this, another angel appeared from heaven. “Our Father, the Lord of hosts,” he told him, “commands you to go to Rome, where this very moment the son of a soldier is being baptized. Take charge of him and guard him through the Holy Spirit given to him at baptism. And I shall punish the master

of this servant and teach him not to become angry nor hit his servants nor let them starve to death.”

The angel said this on behalf of God and ascended into heaven, while the former set out for Rome according to the divine command.

That instant Nephon saw them bringing up a soul with a lot of commotion. Multitudes of demons were making noise and were attempting to snatch the unfortunate soul. It was the soul of a clergyman who had spent his life in immorality. He even committed murders! He would lie in wait in the street at night and kill the passers by. They he would take their clothes and sell them to feed his jesters!

Therefore, as that wretched soul was ascending, it didn't make it through the fourth station: the dragon stretched out his hands with impudence, snatched it from the angels and cast it down to earth. The demons took it then, lowered it into the abyss and turned it over to the prince of darkness, so that it might remain captive there along with similar sinful souls, until the day of the common resurrection.

As the dark demons were returning again, they were puffed up and put on airs saying amongst themselves: “Look, we even beat the clergy of the Nazarene and trample them under foot.”

One of them sadly whispered: “Why are we bragging that we destroyed one unfortunate soul? I can show you a large number of priests who shine with virtue; we can't even touch them.”

“If they didn't have the mark of Jesus,” the others answered, “and His help all around them, then you'd see our power.”

“And why should we fear the wood on which the Nazarene was nailed? This is an example of complete decadence.”

“It is not the wood, but the terrible lightning which pours forth from it. The bad

part is that the lightning which burns us doesn't come only from the wood, but the same thing happens when the Christians sign themselves with this symbol.”

Then to trap him the others said to him: “And when did you experience all this?”

“In Constantinople there is a relentless enemy of our named Nephon. I and others of us threw ourselves at him from his youth. We used to send him provocative temptations all day. We inflamed him so terribly that in the end he fell into sin. And while we registered his defeat with a lot of pride, he repented at the same instant and started reproaching himself and weeping: ‘Oh! For this body that the worms will eat, I yielded to my evil desire. Woe to me, it is this that will throw me into the fire.’ And saying this he became like a maniac. We laughed at his expense. But he who was very foxy and knew our tricks shouted to us: ‘Now I’ll show you, corrupt demons!’ He got up and once, and with his hand he traced the sign of the Nazarene on us. Oh! It was as if fire passed through our hearts immediately. Terrorized we dispersed instantly. Only one of us dared to stand far off, to see what he was going to do. We saw him enter the church quickly. He prostrated himself to God three times and said: Lord, I am a sinful man, young in age, still struggling with my passions and the fire of the flesh. Therefore, do not count this fall of mine as sin. You are Lord and have authority to forgive my offenses with only Your word.’

“As soon as he said these words, an angel crowned him for his repentance and contrition. In spite of all this,” the demon continued, “furious with his flesh, he began to strike his face with all the strength he had. Later, he lifted his hands again to heaven and beseeched God, saying: ‘You, the fearful God, Who gave birth to the fearful Son, and rule everywhere with Your fearful Spirit, hear me, the filthy one. And torture those abominations who roar with laughter at my expense. For against Thee only have I sinned, I, the filthy and corrupt one.’

“At once the angel who had crowned him threw a rope and tied us all together. Then taking us out one by one, he gave us each a thousand blows. With our cries and woes we raised the roof. As he was hitting us, he was saying: ‘So that you may never be the reason again for the servants of God to hit their bodies!’ And

after that compassionless angel tortured us a lot, we barely got away. From that time, then, whenever I see that Nephon I vanish, because I fear the beatings!...”

When the demon finished his tale, the others started making fun of him and calling him wretched, unfortunate, and a coward.

In the meantime, in his vision Nephon was following everything the evil spirits were saying about him, and laughed at them.

After a little while he saw an angel descending toward Constantinople, the seven-hilled city. He was holding a terrible flaming sword. Someone, tormented pitifully, was dying at that hour. He was a compassionless usurer. In addition, he used to gossip scandalously about Nephon: he called him a heretic, a hypocrite, etc. Why is he this and that? Why does he do this or that?” The miserable one didn’t look at himself but concerned himself with others.

Well, the angel of fire came and stood by his bed looking toward heaven, as if waiting for something. Indeed a voice was heard: “Quickly punish the antichrist severely and cut the prodigal soul from the bonds of the body. When he lived, this good-for-nothing never did My will. And not only that, but he also judged My servant Nephon. Hit him fiercely! May he never again choke the poor by lending them gold.”

As soon as the punishing angel heard the voice, he heartily struck the miserable usurer with all the strength he had, and he gave up the spirit at once gnashing his teeth and groaning from the depths of his soul. The angel took his soul which was terribly tormented and turned toward the abyss...

Then St. Nephon came to himself. Dumbfounded and sad for all he had seen, he thought and said: “Ah, how much misery we, humble and sinful, hide! And then Judgment and the terrible fire come wherever we go for all eternity. We must aim for salvation at all costs, forcing ourselves to do good. Only in this way we will please God and not violate His commandments.” and immediately he prayed:

“O Lord, my God, I’ve placed my hope in You; deliver me from those who pursue me and save me. The treacherous prince of darkness, like a roaring lion, will snatch my miserable soul, if You, my Christ, do not deliver it and save it by Your Holy Spirit...Blessed is he who obeys You, Who became poor and destitute for our salvation; because at the time of his death You will redeem him from the corrupt spirits of wickedness who, like evil censors, shameless accusers, compassionless overseers, stand and seek to devour his poor soul. O fearful and Almighty Master, Who shakes everything, and they tremble, deliver the race of Christians from those tyrants. Have mercy on all those who have placed their hopes in You, O Holy One, and forgive them, who grievously transgress Your law and ceaselessly embitter Your compassion.”

He was still tearful from the thought of that poor usurer whose soul was taken by the avenging angel with the flaming sword. He was thinking how bitter his death was without any pity from God--even though he occasionally gave something to the poor from the interest he collected!...Because, as Nephon said, at the time his miserable soul was being tormented, he cried out: “Remember, O Lord, the alms I gave to the poor.” But a voice was heard saying: “Yes, wretch! You drank the blood of the poor and watered other poor men with it!...Shall I be merciful to you for that, or because you slandered the one I love? Night and day he prays for the sinners. He wouldn’t stop beseeching even for you. Then, why did you speak evil of him? Learn now that you hot have judged anyone!...”

Nephon related all this to his acquaintances and advised them: “Be careful, my children, not to judge anyone, especially if he is a man of God. I beg you, guard yourselves from this sin. Look after yourselves and be conscious of your own faults. With this consciousness we will be able to repent. Some of the servants of God show and some hide their virtue. Certain people criticize those who have the courage to be seen. However, these will be punished harshly on Judgment Day. For God has placed before all men those who scorn human glory, so that they may confess their faith with courage, and thus benefit many. *Let your light so shine before men, He commanded them, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in Heaven.* And conversely, to those who lean toward conceit He says: *Those who do the works of righteousness openly to be pleasing to*

people and not to Me, truly, truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. For he who willfully is vain will not receive mercy. Keeping this in mind, then, my children, let us not judge anyone, and let us not pay attention to the slanderers, whether they criticize righteous person or anyone else. *Judge not*, the Lord commands. You who sit on the throne, do not scorn your servant, for he may hide within him the Spirit of God and, without realizing it, you find yourself the enemy of God.”

The saint said this to them and begged them once more to look to themselves and not judge anyone. But also they should not lend money with interest, for how does it profit a man to say he is a Christian, when he has stored up gold and lends it out with interest? First of all, he does not have his hope in God. Second, he is an idolater. Third, he suffers of avarice and drowns night and day in cares. He doesn't even get enough sleep! Finally, death comes, too. Oh, what foolishness!...