

God's mercy and His grace be upon you!

In the Orthodox Church, we serve "memorial services" for the repose of the departed.

What is it? You can find the service online at [Trisagion Prayers of Mercy for the Departed](#). At St. James, we place a bowl of [kolyva](#) or a memorial loaf on the memorial table in the front right of the Church. After Liturgy (usually), we gather with the loved ones of the departed around the table, holding candles, representing the light of Christ that illuminates our lives and reminds us of the light of the Resurrection, that our departed loved ones have partially tasted and that we will all share at the Second Coming of Christ. We sing and pray together, asking God's mercy on the departed and on us.

Why? After all, they're ... dead. They've died. Aren't they beyond the reach of our prayers? The answer is - NO! They are not dead. They are alive in Christ, sharing in the eternal life that we all received at our Baptism and Chrismation. Those we love who precede us in death are not removed from the Body of Christ. They are part of us, as we are part of them. And we pray for them (a) because we are commanded to pray for "all persons" (I Tim. 2:1); (b) because hope for and expect them to realize their salvation and full union with the God Who is Love; (c) because we know that our God is a merciful God who loves everyone; and (d) because there is no time with God, in the eternal life that is always present before the throne of God, so there is no "then" of the moment of their death that contrasts with the "now" of our prayers. All is one with our God.

What are we asking God for? We ask God to have mercy on them. We are not "praying souls out of hell," for two reasons: (1) hell, inasmuch as it can be understood as a "place," is a place "prepared for the devil and his angels," and we can hope that no one else resides there, now or ever; and (2) we do not judge the departed or anyone else, as to their salvation or their eternal destiny. But we do ask the merciful God to show mercy on the departed. We pray in faith that the Love of the God Who is Love will overlook the transgressions of the departed in His mercy and forbearance, as we ask Him to overlook ours (I Pet. 4:8).

When? Orthodox Christians pray for the departed always - see (a) above; we traditionally serve the Trisagion Prayers of Mercy (i) at the gravesite, upon the burial of the departed; (ii) on the day of their repose and daily for the 40 days afterwards, most often privately in our homes; (iii) on the third, ninth and fortieth day after their repose especially, in the Church if possible; and (iv) on the anniversary of their repose (as a practical matter, at St. James, on the Sunday nearest the date). We pray for 40 days and on the third, ninth and fortieth day in accord with our understanding of the spiritual progress of the departed after their repose. We pray on specific days because, while there is no time with God, we are time-bound mortals who exist in time and space, and our God was incarnate in our time and space, thus sanctifying both. We act in time and space to participate in His holy Life.

What about non-Orthodox Christians and others? We are commanded to pray for God's mercy on *all persons* (see above). We do not judge the souls or the salvation of anyone but ourselves. The prayers of mercy may be prayed for any person, of any faith or of no faith at all. Yet as the Church corporate, gathered before the heavenly throne and participating in the eternal Liturgy, we offer prayers together only for those who we know have been fully joined to the Body of Christ in His Holy Church, the Orthodox Church. We do not thereby imply any judgment; on the contrary, we precisely thereby eschew judgment, while joining our hearts to that of our merciful God who desires that none should perish but that all should attain to eternal life. The Trisagion Prayers of Mercy may be prayed for both Orthodox and non-Orthodox persons, before the family icon corner, at the grave of the departed, or in private prayers, at any time, but most especially at anniversaries and in times when the memory of the departed seems to be especially intense - it may be that at those times, in God's ineffable providence, our prayers have greater effect.

If you have any questions, or if you want St. James to serve a memorial service for a loved one, please see Fr. Timothy. God bless you, and may He grant peace and repose to those for whom you pray.

Fr. Timothy

