

Is 'Heaven is for Real' for real?

An Orthodox Reflection on Near-Death Experiences: Week Five

REVIEW:

- *The soul...meaning the mind, memory, personality, sense perception...survives physical death. Secular, scientific research supports this claim.
- *After clinical death, the soul continues to perceive the earthly realm, but also begins to perceive a heretofore unseen "spiritual realm". Other beings of a spiritual nature inhabit this realm.
- *These beings are often perceived of as friendly and even loving - most often being identified as departed loved ones or a "being of light".
- *The core worldview offered by contemporary NDEers and NDE researchers is a specifically Christian worldview: survival of the individual "person" after biological death, a realm beyond the physical world, a loving and personal Creator, etc.
- *Other elements of the traditional Christian worldview are denied or challenged by contemporary NDE researchers. This includes things like: judgment, hell, sin, talk of repentance, the need for Christ / salvation.
- *Although the vast majority of NDEs are reportedly positive in nature, and despite the absence of judgment and hell in the worldview of contemporary NDE researchers, there are occasional reports of judgment and hell in contemporary NDEs.
- *People in other cultures report significantly higher incidents of negative NDEs than Americans. Along with departed relatives, NDEers in other cultures also often reported seeing their pagan gods.
- *God's judgment is His love...Which is heavenly glory for those prepared to receive His love - persons transformed by living a life of repentance and keeping Christ's commandments. But which is condemnation and suffering for those who are unprepared to share in the life of God.
- *Satan and fallen angels exist. Like all angelic beings, they are godlike to us mortals, possessing incredible power and knowledge. Satan's very nature and intention is to deceive and lead all others far from God.
- *Free will: We CHOOSE our company by our actions (not merely by our "beliefs").

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Discerning Near-Death Experiences...

Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos

"There are also differences between demonic and divine apparitions....The important thing is that we not rank together all dying or after-death experiences, nor should we attribute them to a single cause, because that would create a great misconception....On this point we Orthodox, since we have a living tradition, are at an advantage, for we can distinguish these phenomena."

"After such experiences no can remain unmoved and unrepentant. If someone does, and especially if he is proud, then either the experiences were demonic through and through, or even if they were a sign from God, he distorts it, to his cost. One such experience can be the cause of condemnation and greater blame."

"In any case, if it is difficult for us to understand the type and character of apparitions, we are required, as the holy Fathers advise us, to turn to those who have experience and knowledge of the spiritual life. The psychiatrists and scientists of this world have nothing to say on these matters. They can suspect and perceive that there is something beyond the present life, but in any case they are unable to make a true and infallible diagnosis."

"...We can say that the person who is approaching death perceives another reality which he possibly did not know before. We think that the life that we see is the real life. However, since there is a creation which is both noetic and tangible, therefore beyond the world of the perceptible and the sense there is also another world which does not come under reason and the senses. Thus he who is being guided towards death is being guided towards reality, authenticity."

"Man's nous, however, should not be squandered aimlessly in various affairs, even in apparitions. The nous should have unceasing mindfulness of God, which is inseparably connected with the awareness of sinfulness. Therefore our nous should not scrutinize the so-called "supernatural" states. Even if one has some experience, one should not rest on this exclusively....We do not benefit if we see angels and if we raise the dead when we have not acquired spiritual knowledge of ourselves, when we have not raised our dead self from passions and sins. God permits our sojourn in life so that we can repent and taste the Kingdom of Heaven."

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From the IVth Dialogue of St. Gregory the Great (+604)

Saints appearing at the moment of death to accompany a holy soul...

Neither must I forget that which the reverent Abbot Stephen (who not long since died in this city, and whom you knew very well) told me to have happened in the same province of Nursia. For he said that a Priest dwelt in that country, who in the fear of God governed the church committed to his charge....When this reverent man had long lived in this world, the fortieth year after he was made priest, by a great and vehement ague [he] was brought to the last cast.... [H]is strength somewhat increasing, he began with great joy to cry out: "Welcome, my Lords, welcome, my Lords: why have you vouchsafed to visit me, your unworthy servant? I come, I come: I thank you, I thank you": and when he did often repeat these and the like words, his friends that were present asked him to whom he spake, to whom with a kind of admiration he answered: "What? do you not here behold the holy Apostles? Do you not see the chief of them, St. Peter and St. Paul?" And so, turning himself again towards them, he said: "Behold I come, behold I come": and in speaking those words, he gave up his happy ghost. And that he did indeed verily behold the holy Apostles, he testified by that his departure with them. And thus it doth often fall out, by the sweet providence of God, that good men at their death do behold his Saints going before them, and leading as it were the way, to the end they should not be afraid at the pangs thereof; and that whiles their souls do see the Saints in heaven, they may be discharged from the prison of this body, without all fear and grief.

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Saints appearing at the moment of death to accompany a holy soul...

Concerning which thing I must also tell you that which the servant of God, Probus (who now in this city liveth in an Abbey), gave me to understand of an uncle of his, called also Probus, who was Bishop of the city of Reati. For he said that, being grievously sick and in great extremity of death, his father, whose name was Maximus, caused many physicians to be sent for, to see whether by their skill he could any ways be helped; who all upon the feeling of his pulse, gave sentence of speedy death. When dinner time was come, and the day somewhat far spent, the venerable Bishop, more careful of their health than of his own, desired them that they would go up with his old father into the higher part of his palace; and after their great pains, to refresh themselves with a poor dinner. Whereupon all went up, and none remained with him, but a little young boy, who, as Probus saith, is yet living. The little boy, standing by his bedside, suddenly

saw certain men coming in to the man of God, appalled in white stoles, whose faces were far more beautiful and bright than the whiteness of their garments: whereat being amazed and afraid, he began to cry out, and ask who they were: at which noise the Bishop also looking up, beheld them coming in and knew them, and thereupon comforted the little boy, bidding him not to cry, or be afraid, saying that they were the holy martyrs St. Juvenal and St. Eleutherius that came to visit him: but he, not acquainted with any such strange visions, ran out at the doors as fast as he could, carrying news hereof both to his father and the physicians; who, going down in all haste, found the Bishop departed: for those Saints, whose sight the child could not endure, had carried his soul away in their company.

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Saints appearing to foretell the departure of a holy soul...

Neither will I conceal that which I received by the relation of those that are grave and of good credit. In the time of the Goths, an honourable young maid called Galla...was bestowed in marriage: whose husband, before the year came about, departed this life: and though both plenty of wealth and her young years were great allurements to a second marriage, yet she made choice rather to be married spiritually to God, in which after mourning everlasting joy doth follow: than to become again subject to carnal matrimony, which always beginneth with joy, and in conclusion endeth with sorrow...Wherefore straight upon the death of her husband, casting off her secular habit and attire, she rendered herself for the service of God to that Nunnery which is by the church of the blessed Apostle St. Peter; where she lived for the space of many years in prayer and simplicity of heart, and bestowed alms plentifully upon needy and poor people....At length, when almighty God determined to bestow upon her an everlasting reward, he sent her a cancer in one of her breasts. Two candles she had usually in the night time burning before her bed....One night, lying sore afflicted with this her infirmity, she saw St. Peter standing before her bed, betwixt the two candlesticks, and being nothing afraid, but glad, love giving her courage, thus she spake unto him: "How is it, my Lord? what? are my sins forgiven me?" To whom (as he hath a most gracious countenance) he bowed down a little his head, and said: "Thy sins are forgiven thee; come and follow me." But because there was another Nun in the Monastery which Galla loved more than the rest, she straightways beseeched him that sister Benedicta might go with her: to whom he answered that she could not then come, but another should: "and as for her," quoth he, "whom you now request, thirty days hence shall she follow you": and when he had thus said, he vanished out of her sight. After whose departure, she straightways called for the mother of the Convent, and told her what she had seen and heard: and the third day following, both she and the other before mentioned departed this life: and she also, whose company Galla desired, the thirtieth day after did follow them. The memory of which thing continueth still fresh in that Monastery, so that the Nuns which now live there (receiving it by tradition from their predecessors) can tell every little point thereof, as though they had been present at that time when the miracle happened.

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Heavenly Music and Fragrance at the departure of a holy soul...

Here also we have to know that oftentimes, at the death of God's servants, heavenly music is heard, to the end that whiles they give willing ear to that melody, the soul may have no leisure to feel, when it departeth from the body. For I remember that...in that porch which is in the way to St. Clement's Church, there lay a certain man called Servulus, whom I doubt not but you also do remember: who, as he was poor in wealth, so rich in merits. This man had long been afflicted with sickness: for from the first time that I knew him, to the very last hour of his life, never can I remember but that he was sick of the palsy, and that so pitifully, that he could not stand, nor sit

up in his bed: neither was he ever able to put his hand unto his mouth, or to turn from one side to the other. His mother and brethren did serve and attend him, and what he got in alms, that by their hands he bestowed upon other poor people. Read he could not, yet did he buy the holy scriptures, which very carefully he caused such religious men as he entertained to read unto him: by means whereof, according to his capacity, though, as I said, he knew not a letter of the book, yet did he fully learn the holy scripture. Very careful he was in his sickness always to give God thanks, and day and night to praise his holy name. When the time was come, in which God determined to reward this his great patience: the pain of his body struck inwardly to his heart, which he feeling, and knowing as his last hour was not far off, called for all such strangers as lodged in his house, desiring them to sing hymns with him, for his last farewell and departure out of this life: and as he was himself singing with them, all on a sudden he cried out aloud, and bade them be silent, saying: "Do ye not hear the great and wonderful music which is in heaven?" and so whiles he lay giving of ear within himself to that divine harmony, his holy soul departed this mortal life: at which time, all that were there present felt a most pleasant and fragrant smell, whereby they perceived how true it was that Servulus said. A monk of mine, who yet liveth, was then present, and with many tears used to tell us, that the sweetness of that smell never went away, but that they felt it continually until the time of his burial.

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Feeling the Presence of Saints & Angels; Foretelling of death; Heavenly Light, Music & Fragrance at the departure of a holy soul...

...I remember likewise, how I told a certain thing, which Speciosus, my fellow-Priest, doth also verify to be most true. At such time as I entered into religion, there dwelt in this city, near to the church of our blessed Lady, a certain old woman, called Redempta....This foresaid Redempta had two scholars, which wore the same habit that she did: the one called Romula, and the name of the other, which yet liveth, I can not tell, though by sight I know her very well. These three together in, one little house lived a poor life, yet rich for piety and virtue: and of these twain Romula far excelled the other in merit of life: for she was a woman of marvellous patience, passing obedient, a great observer of silence, and one that with great zeal bestowed her time in continual prayer....[T]his foresaid Romula fell into such a pitiful palsy, that she was fain to keep her bed: where she lay, deprived almost of all the use of her members: which great cross, notwithstanding, drew her not to any impatience, but rather the sickness of her body was the health of her soul, and the cause of her greater increase in virtue: for the less she could do in other things, the more she did in prayer and devotion. Upon a certain night she called for Redempta (who, as I said, brought them both up as her daughters), saying: "Come, mother, come, mother": who straightways with her other disciple rose up, and (as myself and many more have heard it from their own mouths) when they were about midnight by her bedside, suddenly there came a light from heaven, which filled all that cell: and such a brightness there appeared, that it put them both into a wonderful fear, and, as themselves did afterward report, all their body became cold, in such sort, that there they stood amazed: for they heard a noise, as it were of many that came in, and the cell door shaken and thrust open, as though there had been a great press of people: and as they said, they heard a great company come in, yet they saw nobody, and that by reason of great fear and much light: for both fear did make them to hold their eyes downward, and the brightness of such plenty of light did so dazzle them, that they could not behold anything. Straight after that light followed a wonderful pleasant smell, which did greatly comfort their fearful hearts. Romula, perceiving that they could not endure that abundance of light, with sweet words comforted Redempta, that stood trembling by her bedside, saying: "Be not afraid, mother; for I shall not die at this time": and when she had often repeated those words, by little and little the light vanished away, but yet the sweet smell remained still, and so

continued both the next and the third day after. Upon the fourth night, again she called for that her mother, and when she was come, she desired to receive the Sacrament, and so she did; and behold, before Redempta or her other disciple departed from her bedside, suddenly they heard two quires singing before the door without: and as they said, they perceived by their voices that the one was of men, that began the psalms, and the other of women that answered: and whiles these heavenly funerals were in celebrating before the cell door, that holy soul departed this life, and was carried in that manner up into heaven: and the higher those two choirs did ascend, the less did they hear that celestial music, until at length they heard no more: and beside that sweet and odoriferous smell, which before they felt, vanished quite away.

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Christ Himself appearing to receive a holy soul; Heavenly Fragrance...

Sometime also for the comfort of the soul that departeth, there appeareth unto it the author himself of life, and rewarder of all virtue: for proof whereof I will here report that which I remember...concerning mine aunt Tarsilla: who, in the company of two others of her sisters, had for continuance in prayer, gravity of life, singularity in abstinence, arrived to the top of perfection. To this woman, Felix, my great-grandfather, sometime Bishop of this see of Rome, appeared in vision, and showed her the habitation of everlasting light, speaking thus: "Come with me, and I will entertain you in this dwelling place of light." Shortly after, taken with an ague, she was brought to the last cast: and as when noble men and women lie a dying, many do visit them for the comfort of their friends: so divers both men and women, at the time of her departure, were come, which stood round about her bed: at what time she, suddenly casting her eyes upward, beheld our Saviour coming: whereupon, looking earnestly upon him, she cried out to them that were present: "Away, away: my Saviour Jesus is come": and so, fixing her eyes upon him, whom she beheld, her holy soul departed this life: and such a wonderful fragrant smell ensued, that the sweetness thereof gave evident testimony that the author of all sweetness was there present. Afterward, when her dead body, according to the manner, was made ready to be washed, they found that, with long custom of prayer, the skin of her arms and knees was, like a camel's, become hard: and so her dead body gave sufficient testimony, what her living spirit had continually practiced.

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Saints appearing to urge preparation for a soul's holy departure...

Neither must that be forgotten, which the servant of God before mentioned, called Probus, used to tell of a little sister which he had, called Musa: for he said that one night our blessed Lady appeared unto her in vision, showing her sundry young maids of her own years, clothed all in white: whose company she much desiring, but yet not presuming to go amongst them, the Blessed Virgin asked her whether she had any mind to remain with them, and to live in her service: to whom she answered that willingly she would. Then our blessed Lady gave her in charge, not to behave herself lightly, nor to live any more like a girl, to abstain also from laughing and pastime, telling her that after thirty days she should, amongst those virgins which she then saw, be admitted to her service. After this vision, the young maid forsook all her former behaviour: and with great gravity reformed the levity of her childish years: which thing her parents perceiving, and demanding from whence that change proceeded, she told them what the blessed Mother of God had given her in commandment, and upon what day she was to go unto her service. Five and twenty days after, she fell sick of an ague; and upon the thirtieth day, when the hour of her departure was come, she' beheld our blessed Lady, accompanied with those virgins which before in vision she saw to come unto her, and being called to come away, she answered with her eyes modestly cast downward, and very distinctly spake in this manner:

"Behold, blessed Lady, I come, behold, blessed Lady, I come": in speaking of which words she gave up the ghost, and her soul departed her virgin's body, to dwell for ever with the holy virgins in heaven.

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Judgment of a young blasphemer; Demonic Apparitions at the moment of death...

This child, in that great mortality which happened three years since, fell sick, and came to the point of death: and his father holding him at that time in his arms, the child (as they say, which were then present) beheld with trembling eyes certain wicked spirits coming towards him: at which sight he began to cry out in this manner: "Keep them away, father, keep them away": and crying so out, he turned away his face, and would have hid himself in his father's bosom: who demanding why he was so afraid, and what he saw: "O father," quoth he, "there be blackamoors come to carry me away": after which words straightways he blasphemed God, and so gave up the ghost. For to the end God might make it known to the world for what sin he was delivered to such terrible executioners, he permitted him at his very death to iterate that sin, for which his father, while he lived, would not correct him: so that he which through God's patience had long lived a blasphemer, did at length, by his just judgment, blaspheming end his life, that the father might both know his own sin...

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Demonic Apparitions at the moment of death...

But Chrisorius...(as his kinsman Probus, of whom I made mention before, told me) was a substantial man in this world, but as full of sin as of wealth: for he was passing proud, given to the pleasures of the flesh, covetous, and wholly set upon scraping of riches together. But when God determined to make an end of so many sins, he sent him a great sickness; and when his last time drew near, in that very hour in which his soul was to leave the body, lying with his eyes open, he saw certain cruel men and black spirits stand before him, pressing upon him to carry him away to the pit of hell: at which fearful sight he began to tremble, to wax pale, to sweat, and with pitiful outcries to crave for truce: and often with faltering tongue to call for his son Maximus (whom, when I was a monk, I knew also to profess the same kind of life), saying: "Come away, Maximus, with all speed. Never in my life did I any harm to thee, receive me now in thy faith." His son, greatly moved at these outcries, came unto him in all haste: and his whole family lamenting and crying out, repaired also to his chamber: none of all which beheld those wicked spirits, which did so urge and vex him: but by his trouble of mind, by his paleness and trembling, they made no doubt of their presence: for he was so affrighted with their terrible looks, that he turned himself every way in his bed. Lying upon his left side, he could not endure their sight: and turning to the wall, there also he found them: at last, being very much beset, and despairing of all means to escape their hands, he cried out with a loud voice: "O truce till to-morrow, O truce till to-morrow": and crying out in this sort he gave up the ghost. This being the manner of his death, certain it is that he saw this fearful sight not for himself, but for us: that his vision might do us good, whom God's patience doth yet with fatherly long sufferance expect to amendment.

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Why those who see Hell & Judgment after dying sometimes come back to life...

For God of his great and bountiful mercy so disposeth, that some after their death do straightways return again to life, that having seen the torments of hell, which before when they heard they would not believe, they may now at least tremble at, after they have with their eyes beheld them. For a certain Sclavonion, who was a monk and lived with me here in this city in my Monastery, used to tell me that at such time as he dwelt in the wilderness, that he knew one

Peter, a monk born in Spain, who lived with him in the vast desert called Evasa which Peter (as he said) told him how, before he came to dwell in that place, by a certain sickness he died, and was straightways restored to life again, affirming that he had seen the torments and innumerable places of hell, and divers, who were mighty men in this world, hanging in those flames; and that as himself was carried to be thrown also into the same fire, suddenly an Angel in a beautiful attire appeared, who would not suffer him to be cast into those torments: but spake unto him in this manner: "Go thy way back again, and hereafter carefully look unto thyself, how thou ledest thy life": after which words his body by little and little became warm, and himself, waking out of the sleep of everlasting death, reported all such things as happened about him: after which time he bound himself to such fasting and watching, that though he had said nothing, yet his very life and conversation did speak what torments he had seen and was afraid of: and so God's merciful providence wrought in his temporal death that he died not everlastingly.

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On Discernment..

Holy men, indeed, by a certain inward spiritual taste, do discern betwixt illusions and true revelations, by the very voices or representations of the visions themselves: so that they know what they receive from the good spirit, and what they suffer by illusion from the wicked: and therefore, if our mind be not herein very attentive and vigilant, it falleth into many vanities, through the deceit of the wicked spirit: who sometime useth to foretell many true things, that, in the end, he may by some falsehood ensnare our soul.

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Why those who lay dying or have had an NDE may be able to "prophesy"...

Sometime the soul itself by reason of the spiritual nature which it hath, doth foresee some thing which will so fall out; and sometime souls, before their departure, come to the knowledge of future things by revelation; sometime also, when they are straightways to leave the body, by heavenly inspiration they penetrate with their spiritual eyes the secrets of heaven. For that the soul, by reason of the spiritual nature which it hath, doth know things to come, certain it is, by that which happened to a certain advocate in this city, who died two days ago of a pain in his side. For a little before his death, he called for his boy, to give him his apparel, that he might rise up and walk: who, supposing him not to know what he said, refused to do what he willed him. Whereupon he rose up, put on his clothes, and said that he would go to the church of St. Sixtus, which is on the Appian way: and when not long after, his sickness increasing, he departed this life, determined it was, that his body should be buried in the church of St. Januarius the martyr, which standeth upon the way called Praenestine. But because they which had the care of his burial thought it too far off, suddenly they resolved upon a new course: and so, going forth with his corpse by the Appian way, not knowing what he had said, they buried him in that church which before he had mentioned: and seeing it is well known that he was a man given to the world, and one that sought after earthly gain, how could he know that which fell out, but that the force and spiritual nature of his soul did foresee what should become of his body?

That those also, which lie a dying, do oftentimes by divine revelation foretell what shall happen afterward, we may learn by such things as have fallen out amongst us in divers Abbeyes. For ten years since, there was a monk in my Monastery, called Gerontius, who, lying sore sick, saw by vision in the night time, certain white men beautifully appavelled to descend from above into the Monastery, and standing by his bed-side, one of them said: "The cause of our coming hither is to choose out certain of Gregory's monks, to send them abroad unto the wars": and forthwith he commanded another to write in a bill the names of Marcellus, Valentinian, Agnellus,

and divers others, whose names I have now forgotten: that being done, he said further: "Put down also the name of him that now beholdeth us." By which vision he being assured of that which would come to pass, the next morning he told the monks, who they were that should shortly die out of the Monastery, adding also that himself was to follow them. The next day the foresaid monks fell more dangerously sick, and so died all in that very order which they were named in the bill. Last of all, himself also departed this life, who had foretold the departure of the other monks before him.

Likewise in that mortality which, three years since, lamentably afflicted this town, there was in the Monastery of the city of Portus, a young monk called Mellitus, a man of wonderful simplicity and humility, whose last day being come, he fell desperately sick of the common disease: which when venerable Felix, Bishop of the same place, understood (by whose relation myself have learned this story), very careful he was to visit him, and with sweet words to comfort him against death: adding, notwithstanding, that by God's grace he might live long in this world. To whom the sick man answered that his time was at hand, saying that there came unto him a young man with letters, willing him to open and read them: which when he had done, he said that he found both his own name, and all the rest of them which, the Easter before, had been baptized by that Bishop, written in letters of gold: and first of all he said that he found his own name, and afterward the rest of them that were christened at that time: by which he made no doubt but that both himself and the rest should shortly depart this life, and so it fell out, for he died that very day: and after him followed all those which had before been baptized, so that, within the space of a few days, no one of them was left alive. Of whom no question can be made, but that the reason why the foresaid servant of God saw them written in gold, was because their names were written in heaven in the everlasting sight of God. And as these men, by divine revelation, knew and foretold such things as were to come: so sometimes souls, before their departure, not in a dream but waking, may have some taste of heavenly mysteries. For you were well acquainted with Ammonius, a monk of my Monastery, who whiles he lived in a secular weed and was married to the daughter of Valerianus, a lawyer in this city, continually and with all diligence he followed his business: by reason whereof he knew whatsoever was done in his father-in-law's house. This man told me, how, in that great mortality which happened in this city, in the time of that noble man Narses, there was a boy in the house of the foresaid Valerianus, called Armentarius, who was very simple and passing humble: when, therefore, that mortal disease entered that lawyer's house, the foresaid boy fell sick thereof, and was brought to the point of death: who suddenly falling into a trance, and afterward coming to himself again, caused his master to be sent for, to whom he told that he had been in heaven, and did know who they were that should die out of his house. "Such and such," quoth he, "shall die, but as for yourself, fear nothing, for at this time die you shall not. And that you may be assured that I have verily been in heaven, behold I have there received the gift to speak with all tongues: you know well enough that ignorant I am of the Greek tongue, and yet will I speak Greek, that you may see whether it be true that I say or no." Then his master spake Greek, and he so answered him in that tongue, that all which were present did much marvel. In the same house there was a Bulgar, servant to the foresaid Narsus, who in all haste, being brought to the sick person, spake unto him in the Bulgarian tongue; and the boy that was born and brought up in Italy, answered him so in that barbarous language, as though he had been born and bred in that country. All that heard him thus talking wondered much, and by experience of two tongues which they knew very well that before he knew not, they made no doubt of the rest, though they could make no trial thereof. After this he lived two days, and upon the third, by what secret judgment of God none can tell, he tare and rent with his teeth his own hands and arms, and so departed this life. When he was dead, all those whom before he mentioned did quickly follow after; and besides them, none in that house died at that time.