

# Purgatory

By Greg Witherow

Catholics believe Purgatory is a place of final sanctification for most Christians enroute to Heaven. It is required because to enter Heaven a Christian must be sinless, not merely forgiven. This is why Christ tells us to be perfect<sup>1</sup>. Protestants protest. They view the doctrine of Purgatory as heretical and offensive in a number of ways. The errors (as Protestants understand it) are as follows. First, it has no foundation in Scripture<sup>2</sup>. Second, it is a slight to Christ's redemptive work on the Cross as Jesus died **for all** (not some) of our sins. Third, the doctrine smacks of "works righteousness". Images of Catholics laboring in vain to work off the debt of sin is exactly why evangelicals say we needed the Reformation. Is Purgatory in fact a Catholic error that has corrupted the gospel? We'll tackle that question in two parts. First, does God punish Christians for their sins or is punishment off the table as a result of the Cross? Secondly, we'll address Purgatory itself.

## Christ Died For All Our Sins

Did Christ die for all of our sins? The answer is **unequivocally Yes**. But in doing so Catholics understand that Christ paid the entire penalty for our *eternal* punishment. Why the qualifier? It is because Scripture explicitly states Christians can undergo *temporal* punishments for sin. We see this in Hebrews.

"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are **punished** by him. For the Lord **disciplines** him whom he loves, and **chastises** (Greek: mastigoo) every son whom he receives."<sup>3</sup>

The same Greek word is used to describe the scourging of Christ in his Passion.

"Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged (Greek: mastigoo) Him."<sup>4</sup>

There are at least two examples in Scripture where *Christians* are punished for their sins. Paul sites our first example when speaking of Christians at Corinth. He writes,

"For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you **are weak and ill, and some have died**. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, **we are chastened** so that we may not be condemned along with the world."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:48 – "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes Protestants quote a "verse" of scripture that supposedly says, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord". The problem is that no such verse exists. It is a misquote of 2 Corinthians 5:8 which says, "and we would rather be away from the body and present with the Lord." Close but no cigar.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12

<sup>4</sup> John 19:1

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:29-32

Notice the Corinthians were chastised for sins they had not yet repented of. Our second example is King David. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed. David repented and was forgiven - but not without a further chastisement.

“David said to Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said to David, **The Lord also has put away your sin**; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.<sup>6</sup>”

And the child did die. Notice that David was punished for a sin he was forgiven of. This is important. It shows that while confessed sins **are always forgiven**<sup>7</sup> (put away) we can still be chastised for them. They are sanctifying disciplines meant for cleansing. They remove attachment to sin and are a medicinal grace (not a Pelagian<sup>8</sup> merit) to our souls.

### **Purgatory In Scripture**

It has been demonstrated that Christ died for **all our sins**, yet God uses **temporal** “medicines” to sanctify us. But is sanctification limited to this life? Paul answers.

“Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw each man's work will become manifest; for **the Day** will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, **he will suffer loss**, though he himself **will be saved, but only as through fire**.”<sup>9</sup>

There are a couple of things we can take from this passage. First, each person will have his or her life tested with “fire” on the Day with some “suffering loss”. Second, even with life’s work burned up, the Christian will pass “through fire” will their salvation intact. Images of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego come to mind<sup>10</sup>. Our question is; **where does event this take place?** It cannot take place in Hell (the person is saved) or in Heaven (the person suffers loss). Nor is Paul speaking of events in this life, as the Day always refers to a post death event. With Heaven, Hell and this world eliminated, we are left with what the Church calls Purgatory.

### **References to The Day**

A person endures two judgments after death, each referred to in Scripture as “the Day”. After death a person undergoes a private judgment and enters either Heaven, Hell or Purgatory. At the end of time all mankind undergoes a public judgment where the Books are opened. Satan, the demons and the lost are cast into the Lake of Fire forever while the

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 12:13, 14

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 1:9

<sup>8</sup> Pelagianism (salvation by works) was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 451; Augustine triumphed.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

<sup>10</sup> See Daniel chapter 3. In this case, these men **passed through fire** unscathed, not even smelling of smoke.

saved enter Heaven. The point here is that “the Day” is a post-death event as the following verses illustrate<sup>11</sup>. The Church Fathers always understood this passage as such and it can be demonstrated they were correct.

**1 Corinthians 5:5:** “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved **in the day of the Lord Jesus.**”

**2 Timothy 4:8:** “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me **on that day;** and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

**1 Thessalonians 5:2:** “For you yourselves know full well that **the day of the Lord** will come just like a thief in the night.”

**Romans 2:5:** “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in **the day** of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.”

**Jude 6:** “And the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of **the great day.**”

**Acts 17:31:** “For he has set **a day when he will judge** the world with justice by the man he has appointed.”

### **Maccabees and Praying for the Dead**

Catholics and Orthodox churches accept the book of Maccabees as canonical. While Protestants don't, the writings depict Jewish beliefs. The text in Maccabees reads,

“In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, **it was a holy and pious thought.** There he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.”<sup>12</sup>

There is no reason to pray for the souls in Hell as they will never be released. And there is no reason to pray for the souls in Heaven as they have been purified. Only those souls undergoing a final purification need our prayers.

### **C.S. Lewis and Augustine**

C.S. Lewis (A Protestant). Letter to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer pages 108, 109

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<sup>11</sup> Quotes taken from the RSV. The Day is sometimes called the “day of judgment” or “day of the Lord”.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Maccabees 12:43-45 Luther rejected this book as Scripture primarily because it did not fit his theology

“I believe in Purgatory...I assume the process of purification will normally involve suffering. Partly from tradition; partly because most real good that has been done me in this life has involved it. But I don't think suffering is the purpose of purgation...The treatment given will be the one required, whether it hurts little or much.”

Augustine. Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Charity 18:69. A.D. 421

“That there should be some fire even after this life is not incredible, and it can be inquired into and either be discovered or left hidden whether some of the faithful may be saved, some more slowly and some more quickly in the greater or lesser degree in which they loved the good things that perish, through a certain purgatorial fire.”

### **The Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**1030** All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, **are indeed assured of their eternal salvation**; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

**1031** The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire:

As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.

**1032** This teaching is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: "Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin." From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.

### **Summary**

We've seen here that while Christ died for all our sins Christians can still be chastised. But not from a vengeful God relishing a chance to dole out one good final whipping, but from a loving God seeking to apply a healing medicine, a sanctifying grace merited by Christ to perfect us for glory. And lastly, Purgatory is not a tool in a works salvation scheme (Pelagianism is a Satanic lie) as we are saved **only** by grace through Christ<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> See the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraphs 1987-2016 covering Justification, Grace and Merit