

Purgatory

by Sebastian R. Fama

The word Purgatory does not appear in Scripture. However, we do find evidence of Purgatory's existence. The word Purgatory comes from the Latin *purgare* and simply means; to make clean or to purify. In Purgatory a soul is purged of all impurities, impurities such as unrepented venial sins and any temporal punishment due for past sins.

The Apostle John shows us that there are different degrees of sin:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. **There is sin which is mortal**; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrongdoing is sin, but **there is sin which is not mortal** (1 John 5:16-17).

The Greek word used for mortal is thanatos (θάνατος). Thanatos signifies spiritual death as a consequence of sin – what we would call eternal damnation. Furthermore, the book of Revelation tells us that nothing unclean shall enter heaven (21:27). What would happen if we did not repent of a sin that was not mortal (venial) and we died? We are neither damned nor forgiven – yet we must be totally forgiven to enter heaven. In Matthew 12:32 Jesus actually talks about forgiveness after death: "And whoever speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit **will not be forgiven**, either in this age or **in the age to come**."

Temporal punishment is a debt to God which remains even after our sins are forgiven. The Old Testament shows us at least two examples. The first is when Moses and Aaron are not allowed to enter the Promised Land because of their sin (Numbers 20:12). The second is when David commits murder and adultery. David tried to hide his sin but is called out by the prophet Nathan. David repents but that is not the end of the story:

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**." Then Nathan went to his house.

Note that Nathan tells David that the Lord has forgiven him. However, because of the seriousness of the offence he must still be punished. And so he is. In both cases there is serious sin, then forgiveness, then punishment. That punishment is called temporal punishment.

Jesus speaks of Purgatory in Matthew 18:23-35. While speaking on forgiveness He says: "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to..." and then He tells a story about a king who forgave a servant's large debt. That same servant refused to forgive a much smaller amount owed to him by a fellow servant. When the king found out he threw the first servant into prison "**until he should pay back the whole debt**." Jesus then says, "So will my Heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." What prison is there in the kingdom of heaven where you might remain until your debt is satisfied? Purgatory is the only thing that makes any sense.

In 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 Paul tells us: "The work of each will come to light, for the day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss, **the person will be saved, but only as through fire**." If that is not Purgatory what is it?

Those detained in Purgatory can be aided by those of us still on earth. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way:

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 (1032).

One example "from the beginning" comes to us from Aristides, one of the first Christian apologists. He wrote: "If one of the faithful dies, obtain salvation for him by celebrating the Eucharist and by praying next to his remains" (*Apology* [A.D. 138]). Note the early date? This was written about 100 years after the death of Christ.

Other Church Fathers agree. Tertullian notes: "The faithful widow prays for the soul of her husband, and begs for him in the interim repose, and participation in the first resurrection, and offers prayers on the anniversary of his death" (*Monogamy* 10 [A.D. 213]).

Inscriptions in the catacombs bear witness to this ancient Church teaching. One reads, "Intercession has been made for the soul of the dear one departed and God has heard the prayer, and the soul has passed into a place of light and refreshment." Another one reads, "In your prayers remember us who have gone before you."

In 2 Timothy 1:16-18 Paul appears to be praying for a friend who has died. He writes: "May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me; he was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me. **May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day** and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus." Note that Paul doesn't say may the Lord grant mercy on Onesiphorus and his household. He mentions them separately because they are not together. He then asks mercy for Onesiphorus "**on that day**" (future tense). This is a reference to the final judgment.

The tradition of the Jews can be found in 2 Maccabees 12:42-46: "**Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out...He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice...if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death...Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.**"

The Jewish historian Josephus, while commenting on the endurance of the Jews under siege in the year 63, writes, "Just as if deep peace enfolded the city, the daily sacrifices, **offerings for the dead**, and every other act of worship were meticulously carried out to the glory of God" (*The Jewish War*). If praying for the dead is wrong, as some contend, and it was practiced in Jesus' day, why didn't He or the Apostles condemn it?

For some of our Protestant friends, the whole idea of Purgatory is problematic. For them salvation is a simple matter. You accept Christ as Lord and Savior and you are saved. Degrees of sin are irrelevant. Once you accept Jesus, they say, all past, present and future sins are forgiven. You are in the express lane to heaven and there are no stops in between. Of course, all of that would contradict the verses of Scripture that we just discussed as well as some others (see essay on Justification).

We can pray for our dearly departed just as we prayed for them while they were with us. Even when we are busy a quick "Jesus have mercy on the souls in Purgatory" is helpful. Of course, the greatest prayer is the Mass.

Offering up our sufferings is another type of prayer. It is often referred to as redemptive suffering. In Colossians 1:24 Paul says: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

Certainly, Paul doesn't mean to say that Christ's work on the cross was in any way deficient. He is talking about offering up his own sufferings as a prayer for the Church. The footnote in the Revised Standard Version says it this way: "Christ's sufferings were, of course, sufficient for our redemption, but all of us may add ours to his, in order that the fruits of his redemption be applied to the souls of men."

While there is suffering in Purgatory there is also great joy. For all who are there are assured of their salvation. Yes, they long for heaven. But they are the Church Penitent and as such they are the bride of Christ. And just like any other bride they wish to be spotless before being presented to their groom. "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).