

THE BIBLICAL
BASIS FOR
PURGATORY

THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR PURGATORY

John Salza

*To the Holy Souls in Purgatory:
“Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine,
et lux perpetua luceat eis.”*

Saint Benedict Press, LLC
Charlotte, North Carolina

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ISBN 978-1-935302-17-9

Cover design by Christopher J. Pelicano

Published in the United States by
Saint Benedict Press, LLC
P.O. Box 410487
Charlotte, NC 28241
www.saintbenedictpress.com

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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PREFACE

LAST year, I was driving to work one rainy and foggy week day morning. Traffic was moving along fairly well when, suddenly, cars began to stop. The stoppage was so abrupt that I had to brake quickly to avoid hitting the car in front of me. There was an accident up ahead.

And it wouldn't be the only accident that morning. As I stopped my car and glanced in the rear view mirror, I noticed the car directly behind me. It was going very fast. Too fast. Based on its speed and distance from my car, I knew that that car couldn't stop before hitting me. I was stuck. So I called out to God to protect us as I braced myself to be struck. And boom! That's what happened.

Fortunately, God answered my prayer and no one was injured. The driver got out of her car and ran over to my side window, apologizing profusely. She confessed that it was entirely her fault and asked me if I was hurt. She told me how guilty she felt and humbly begged for my forgiveness. Realizing that I had sustained no injuries, I assured her that I was fine. I also forgave her on the spot.

There was one minor problem, however. The impact dented the back bumper of my car. As we surveyed the damage caused by the accident, the driver quickly agreed to pay for the repairs. I asked for her driver's license and wrote down her contact information. Of course, if she'd refused to pay for the damage, I could have taken her to court and

the judge would have ordered her to do so. Fortunately, this would be unnecessary. She paid for the repair and the issue completely resolved.

What does this story have to do with purgatory? Keep reading.

In this story, we see the following: Someone commits an offense, confesses her offense, and is forgiven. However, after she is forgiven, the damage caused by her actions remains. Furthermore, she feels guilty about her infraction and will think about the accident for some time to come. She may even have a new fear of driving a car in bad weather. She must also make satisfaction, as a matter of justice, for the damage she caused, while it is in her power to do so. If she doesn't, she will be handed over to the judge who will compel her to pay for the damage. In that case, because she refused to satisfy her obligations while she had the chance, the judge would also punish her (perhaps by giving her a fine or suspending her license).

It should not be difficult for Christians to see in this story an analogy to our spiritual lives. We commit a sin, confess our sins to God, and God forgives us. Yet, even after we are forgiven, the sin has ongoing effects. For ourselves, we feel shame and remorse of conscience. We feel small and weakened. Sometimes we may even feel more disposed to sin. We don't feel the same as we did before committing the sin. And we know that these feelings are manifestations of God's justice.

Regarding the effects on others, we may have injured someone's reputation through the sin of calumny. We may have harmed someone's financial condition through greed. We may have hurt those we love through selfishness. In each case we know we have altered the balance of equity between us and those we have offended. Most importantly, our sins and their effects impede our union with our Lord Jesus

Christ, who commands us to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.¹

Although Jesus requires us to be perfect, most people—even those who die in God’s favor—never reach this state of perfection prior to their death. They died loving and fearing God but did not overcome the imperfections of their fallen human natures. These imperfections often include attachments to created goods, inordinate desires for earthly pleasures, and small but habitual sins. They also include the satisfactions still owed to God, to restore the equality of justice for the many sins that they committed during their lives.

If, as Scripture says, “nothing unclean” shall enter heaven,² how can these imperfect souls ever enter into eternal paradise? If Scripture teaches that without “holiness” no one shall see the Lord,³ how can these souls hope to behold the face of the all-perfect and holy God? The answer: purgatory. In purgatory, God purifies the soul of its imperfections through the fire of His divine justice. During this finite but painful process, the soul is purged of its evil inclinations and makes final satisfaction to God for its sins. After the purification is complete, God admits the soul into heaven where it enjoys the Beatific Vision for all eternity.

Before Jesus exhorted the crowd in His Sermon on the Mount to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, He told them to make friends with their accusers while they were still able to do so. Jesus warned them that if they didn’t, the Judge would put them into prison and they would not be released until they paid the last penny.⁴ In this parable,

1. Cf. Mt 5:48.

2. Rev 21:27. Scripture verses are taken from the *Revised Standard Version—Catholic Edition*, or the *Douay-Rheims* if noted.

3. Heb 12:14.

4. Mt 5:25–26.

Jesus is warning His followers about the rigors of purgatory and the debt of sin. If in this life we fail to pay our spiritual debt to God, the debt for our sins, we will be detained by the Judge in the next life until we have made full satisfaction for it.

* * * * *

Purgatory is one of the most divisive doctrines between Catholics and Protestants. It is also one of the most misunderstood. That is because the doctrine covers the most theological territory. To believe in purgatory is to believe in the Catholic understanding of sin, redemption, grace, and judgment. This means that purgatory is a dogma of the Catholic faith.

Unfortunately, many Catholics don't believe in or understand purgatory. There are many reasons for this. Certainly, simple ignorance—of Scripture and of Church teaching—is one reason. Another reason is the influence of our culture, which ignores and even denies the reality of sin in our world. This error has even trickled into corners of Catholic education, where there has been a de-emphasis on God's justice and an over-emphasis on His mercy and benevolence. We see examples of this at many Catholic funerals, where a white-vested priest assures us that the deceased is in heaven, where we will all someday be reunited. We rarely hear about the reality of purgatory and the need to pray for these departed souls. This becomes a grave injustice to those deceased who are suffering in purgatory and need our prayers for their deliverance.

Although it may sometimes be ignored by those who are more comfortable preaching about God's mercy rather than His justice, the doctrine of purgatory is in fact one of the most merciful and consoling doctrines that Scripture teaches. God purifies us from our defects precisely because

of His mercy. God refines His children in the fire of His love so that they can fully attain to the joys of heaven. God perfects us for our own benefit, not His. As they say, “no pain, no gain.” Through the pain of purgatory, we gain the bliss of heaven. Without purgatory, not only would those of us with unfinished spiritual business be unable to enjoy heaven, we wouldn’t make it there in the first place.

There are some, usually Protestants, who do not under-emphasize God’s justice, and who are familiar with Scripture, but still have difficulty with the doctrine of purgatory. However, when you get right down to it, these are the same people who have difficulty with the plain meaning of Scripture in other areas too. If these people don’t take Jesus literally when He says “this is my body”⁵ or “whose sins you forgive are forgiven,”⁶ they are unlikely to take Jesus literally when He says that God punishes and forgives sins in the afterlife.⁷ If these people don’t take Paul literally when he says God condemns us to hell for our wicked deeds,⁸ they are unlikely to take Paul literally when he reveals that we must pass through fire after our death to be saved.⁹ A Protestant’s denial of purgatory is invariably based on his built-in presuppositions about how to interpret Scripture, and not on what Scripture actually says.

Certainly, Protestants raise many legitimate questions regarding purgatory. For example, if Jesus died for our sins, why does anyone have to go to purgatory? If Jesus took on the punishment for our sins on Calvary, why would God punish us further after we die? If Jesus paid the debt for our

5. Mt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19.

6. Jn 20:23.

7. Lk 12:47–48; Mt 12:32.

8. Rom 2:8; 2 Cor 11:15; Gal 5:19–21; 2 Thess 1:8–9; 1 Tim 1:9–10.

9. 1 Cor 3:15.

sins, why do we still owe a debt after our death? Doesn't the doctrine of purgatory take away from Jesus' saving death on the cross?

These are very good questions, and in this book I hope to provide the answers.

* * * * *

Unlike what some Protestants contend, purgatory is not a novel teaching concocted by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages to scare the faithful into giving alms and doing penance. As we will see, the doctrine of purgatory is explicitly taught in Scripture. The doctrine of purgatory is also found in the writings of the early Church Fathers, from the very beginning of the Church. This means that purgatory is a revelation of Jesus Christ given to His apostles. Purgatory is part of the Deposit of Faith "which was once for all delivered to the saints."¹⁰

In fact, the Jews, who were first to receive "the oracles of God,"¹¹ believed in a state after death where sins could be forgiven. God revealed this truth to the Jews in both Scripture and the prophetic tradition. In addition to the many Old Testament verses revealing how God purifies His elect through trial by fire,¹² we see the common Jewish practice of praying for the dead in the actions of Judas Maccabeas, one of the greatest warriors in Jewish history:

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 . . . Therefore

10. Jude 1:3.

11. Rom 3:2. Pre-Christian and post-Christian Jews (particularly Orthodox Jews), as well as Orthodox Christians, also believe in purgatory. Today, Orthodox Jews are often seen praying for the dead at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

12. Prov 17:3; Dan 12:9–10; Wis 3:5–6; Sir 2:5.

he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.¹³

Interestingly, although most Protestants claim to deny the doctrine of purgatory, they believe in the doctrine implicitly. Protestants admit that Christians continue to sin until the end of their lives. However, they also confess that we will no longer be sinning in heaven. It necessarily follows, then, that there must be a final purification between death and eternal life. Whether the purification happens instantaneously or not is not the issue. The issue is that there is some kind of purification that moves us from a sinful state to a non-sinful state, and this is what the Church calls purgatory. Moreover, it follows that just as we can pray for someone's sanctification in this life, we can also pray for his sanctification in purgatory. Popular Protestant author C.S. Lewis in fact argued that our souls demand purgatory.

Indeed, reason alone demands the existence of purgatory. After all, it is probable that most God-fearing people die with at least small sins on their souls, or with sinful inclinations that they never completely conquered. Since nothing defiled can be in God's presence, it follows that these souls cannot be admitted into heaven with those imperfections. And yet these souls, so close to God, are not deserving of eternal hell-fire, for such a punishment would not be proportionate to the offense. In short, many departed souls are worthy neither of everlasting punishment nor immediate happiness. Because God desires all men to be saved, reason, then, insists on a transitional state where good souls are cleansed of their remaining imperfections so that they are made fit for the bliss of heaven.

13. 2 Macc 12:44–45. All Christians held the book of Maccabees as inspired Scripture until the Protestant revolt in the sixteenth century.

The human heart also demonstrates that there is a purgatory. Who doesn't remember his deceased loved ones in his prayers? I bet there aren't many—even among those who, like Protestants and even non-Christians, don't believe in purgatory. Why do these people remember the dead in their prayers? Because desiring the well-being and happiness of departed family and friends is an instinct of the human heart. If there were only heaven and hell, how could we explain this instinct? In heaven, hope is unnecessary and happiness a certainty; in hell, hope is lost and misery guaranteed. The blessed in heaven don't need our prayers, and the damned in hell can't use them.

* * * * *

This book has three goals: First, to explain the biblical basis for purgatory by examining the relevant Scriptural texts and the writings and interpretations of the Church Fathers. Second, to inspire us to live holy lives and avoid purgatory by the many means Christ has given to us through His Church. Third, to encourage us to pray for our brothers and sisters in purgatory so they may be delivered from their sufferings. Pursuing these goals with faith, hope and charity will be pleasing to God, and merit for us both satisfaction for our sins and greater glory in heaven.

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.¹⁴

JOHN SALZA
Feast of Our Lady, Virgin and Queen
May 31, 2008, Anno Domini

14. 1 Cor 3:14–15.