

Purgatory

by Sebastian R. Fama

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). But only those who are forgiven can enter heaven. The Bible is clear: **Nothing unclean shall enter it [heaven]**, (Revelation 21:27). The Apostle John writes about two types 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. 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 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**." Why mention the age to come if forgiveness only takes place here on earth?

The word Purgatory does not appear in Scripture. However, the concept does. 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.

Temporal punishment is a debt to God which remains after our sins are forgiven. There are two notable examples of temporal punishment in the Old Testament. The first is when Moses and Aaron, despite being forgiven, 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 (2 Samuel 12:13-15).

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.

Jesus refers to 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. We know it cannot be hell as anyone who goes there never gets out. In other words, their debt is never fully paid.

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 be undertaken on behalf of the dead (1032).

One example of "from the beginning" comes to us from Tertullian who writes: "**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]).

All that are in or headed to heaven are members of the Body of Christ. And thus, we are connected to one another. To care and pray for one another is natural and to be expected as we are united in a bond of love. As the Catholic Encyclopedia notes: "Augustine declares that the souls of the faithful departed are not separated from the Church, which is the kingdom of Christ, and for this reason the prayers and works of the living are helpful to the dead" (*The City of God* 20:19 [A.D. 419]).

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." Finally, there is the Epitaph of Abercius:

The citizen of a prominent city, I erected this while I lived, that I might have a resting place for my body. Abercius is my name, a disciple of the chaste shepherd who feeds his sheep on the mountains and in the fields, who has great eyes surveying everywhere, who taught me the faithful writings of life. Standing by, I, Abercius, ordered this to be inscribed; truly I was in my seventy-second year. May everyone who is in accord with this and who understands it pray **for Abercius ([A.D. 190])**.

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 does not 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.

If praying for the dead is wrong, as some contend, and it was practiced in the early Church and even among some Jews, why didn't Jesus, His apostles or any of the Early Church Fathers condemn it?

Yes, there is suffering in Purgatory, but there is also great joy. For all who are there are assured of their salvation. While they long for heaven, they are even more consumed with the desire to be cleansed before being presented to their groom (Jesus). As the Scripture says: "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).