

The False Doctrine of Purgatory

Compiled by Rev. Dan Domke

I. A History and Theological Explanation

The doctrine of purgatory is associated with that of the intermediate state of the soul. The doctrine first began to be broached in the third century. Clement of Alexandria (Paed., iii, Stron., Vii.) speaks of a spiritual fire in this world; and Origen held that it continues beyond the grave (Hom. on Num. SSV.) even Paul and Peter must pass through it in order to be purified from all sin (Hom., on Psalm xxxvi.) Augustine, relying on Matt. xii 32, regarded the doctrine of purgatorial fire for the cleansing away of the remnants of sin as not incredible. Pope Gregory the Great (604) established the doctrine. Thomas Aquinas (qu. lxx. 3), Bonaventura (Compendium theologiae, Vii. 2), and Gerson (Sermo, ii., De defunctis), and other men of the Middle Ages held that the fire of purgatory was material. At the Council of Florence (1449) the Greek Church laid down the idea as one of the irreconcilable differences between them and the Latin church. The Cathari, the Waldensia, Wyclif and Luther opposed the doctrine.

The teaching of the Greek Catholic Church is as stated in their catechism, "The Longer Catechism" (adopted 1839; cfr. Schaff, Creeds, ii. 504).

Q. 376. What is to be remarked of such souls as have departed with faith, but without having had time to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance? This, that they may be aided toward the attainment of a blessed resurrection by prayers offered in their behalf, especially such as are offered in union with the oblation of the bloodless sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ, and by works of mercy done in faith for their memory. Q. 377. On what is this doctrine grounded? On the constant tradition of the Catholic Church, the sources of which may be seen even in the Church of the Old Testament. Judas Maccabaeus offered sacrifices for his men that had fallen (II Macc. xii 43) Prayer for the departed has ever formed a fixed part of the divine Liturgy, from the first Liturgy of the apostle James. St. Cyril of Jerusalem says, "Very great will be the benefit to those souls for which prayer is offered at the moment when the holy and tremendous sacrifice is laying in view." ("Mystogogical Lectures," v.9). St. Basil the Great, in his Prayers for Pentecost, says that "the Lord vouchsafes to receive from us propitiatory prayers and sacrifices for those that are kept in Hades, and allows us the hope of obtaining for them peace, relief, and freedom."

The Roman Catholic doctrine is as follows (Schaff, Creeds, ii. 198-199):

Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the Sacred Writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught in sacred councils, and very recently in this ecumenical synod, that there is a purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar: the holy synod enjoins on bishops that they diligently endeavor that the sound doctrine concerning purgatory...be believed, maintained, taught, and everywhere proclaimed by the faithful of Christ.

The doctrine was elaborated by Bellarmine (1621) De purgatoria, in which supposed proof is offered from these verses: I Kings xxxi, 13; II Kings i., iii.; II Macc. xii. 40 sqq.; Tob. iv. 18; Matt. xii, 32; I Cor. iii. 11, and from the Fathers, the councils, and reason, and the conclusion is reached that the fire of purgatory is material (ignem purgatorii esse corporeum).

The doctrine of purgatory as now taught in the Roman Catholic Church is that souls which depart
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this life in a state of grace but are guilty of venial sins or liable to some punishment after the guilt of sins forgiven, are subject to a process of cleansing before entering heaven. The souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful. These souls probably pray to God in behalf of those who are still known to them on the earth, and they inspire living men to offer prayer in their behalf. But what the location of this place is, what is the nature or quality of the pains, or the duration of the purifying process, or what the methods in which the mediation of the living is applied are questions to which the Church affords no answers. The difficulty that the detention of those who enter purgatory just previous to the final judgment is too short for purification, is met by the suggestion that pure spirits are not under ordinary conditions of time, and that all things are present together in the eternity of God.

The Lutheran View of purgatory is as follows:

II. The Condition of the Soul between Death and the Resurrection.

The number of Scripture passages which describe the condition of the soul after death is comparatively small, since Holy Scripture principally directs the attention of Christian believers to the day of Judgment and the eternal salvation following it rather than to the blessedness which they enjoy immediately after death, I Cor. 1:7, Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:4; I Thess. 4:13ff.; II Tim. 4:7-8; Titus 2:13. The Christian believer therefore patiently "waits" for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and rejoices in the glorious redemption which this day of salvation promises to him, Matt. 24:44-46; Luke 21:31. As Holy Scripture comforts the believer pre-eminently with the glory of Christ's second coming, so also it warns the unbeliever mainly by reminding him of the certainty of the final judgment, II Thess. 1:9-10; Heb. 10:27; II Peter 2:3-6; Jude 6-7, rather than by direct references to His punishment after death, although such passages are not wholly lacking, Heb. 9:27; Luke 16: 22-23.

The godly should therefore always rejoice in Christ's second coming, Matt. 25:34, while the ungodly must constantly dread His righteous judgment as the great and everlasting punishment which he shall not escape. Matt. 25:41-46.

Nevertheless Holy Scripture speaks also of the condition of the soul after death. It tells us that the souls of the ungodly are "spirits in prison," I Peter 3:19, and that they suffer excruciating and endless torments, Luke 16:23-31, so that death leads them directly into everlasting fire, agony and anguish. Ps. 106:16-18.

On the other hand, Scripture assures us that the souls of the godly are in God's hand, Acts. 7:59-60; Luke 23:46, that they are with Christ in paradise, Phil. 1:23; Luke 23:43, and that they are supremely happy, Rev. 14:13, in their new heavenly life, Ps. 16:11; John 17:24; Rom. 8:18. In fact, they are so completely removed from all earthly trouble and sorrow that they are altogether ignorant of those who live upon earth, Is. 63:16 **"But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.:"** (NIV)

Hence we conclude that the souls of the believers are in a condition of perfect blessedness and of perpetual enjoyment of God, though we cannot picture to ourselves in what manner this wonderful

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fruition of celestial bliss takes place. We therefore reject every kind of soul sleep (psychopannychism) which excludes the active enjoyment of God on the part of the departed believer, Phil. 1:23, Luke 23:43.

The statements of Scripture that "the dead sleep," I Cor. 15:18, or that "the dead do not praise God," Ps. 6:5 or that "they enter into rest," Heb. 4:9, etc., do not prove the insensibility of the soul after death, but are figurative expressions, used in a sense which Scripture clearly explains.

To draw inferences with regard to the condition of the soul after death from the nature of the soul ("The soul is never inactive" etc.) is not permissible, since the conclusions so reached are most uncertain, and, above all, since Scripture is the only source and standard of faith, and its teaching must not be supplemented by human speculation.

A psychopannychia which includes a real enjoyment of heavenly bliss (Luther) must not be rejected as wrong since it does not contradict Scriptures. Luther writes (St. L., I, 1758 ff; II, 215 ff.):

It is divine truth that Abraham [after his death] lives with God, serves Him, and rules with Him. [Ephesians 2:6] But what kind of life that is, whether he sleeps or is awake, is a different question. How the soul rests we cannot know; but it is certain that it lives."

With respect to the habitation of the souls (paradise, prison) Gerhard writes: "Scripture, by a general appellation, speaks of a place, John 14:2; Luke 16:28; Acts 1:25. Not that it is a corporeal and physical place, properly so called, but because it is a "where" into which souls, separated from their bodies, are brought together. Scripture enumerates only two such receptacles, or habitations, of the souls, one of which, prepared for the souls of the godly, is called by the most ordinary appellation heaven, and the other, intended for the souls of the wicked, is called hell." (Doctr. Theol., p. 632.)

The so called purgatory (purgatorium, as also the limbus infanum and the limbus patrum) In Roman Catholic teaching there are five places or "wheres" the dead spirits go; hell, purgatory, the abode of infants, the abode of the fathers, and heaven in which, according to papistic doctrine, the souls of believers must expiate the temporal punishments for their sins, is a figment of reason; for Scripture teaches that all believers through faith in Christ obtain (not purgatory, but) eternal life, John 5:24; 3:36.

Moreover, it expressly teaches that not only the souls of saints, such as St. Paul and Stephen (Phil. 1:23; Acts 7:59), but also those of great sinners, converts in the last hour of their lives, such as the thief on the cross, entered with Christ into paradise. Luke 23:43.

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Addendum concerning the meaning of John 3:13.

A good translation and explanation of this passage is: **No one has ever gone into heaven** and then come back to earth. The one exception is Jesus who is **the Son of Man ‘True Man and True God’** (cf. 1:50-51; Dan. 7:13; Matt. 26:64). He is the “Ladder” between heaven and earth with access to both realms (cf. John 1:50-51). He “descended” in the Incarnation and “ascended” in the Ascension. He also was in **heaven** before the Incarnation, and therefore knows the divine mysteries as the second person of the Trinity and as God the Son.