

Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner

Chapter X Purgatory



Revelation 17:4 And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, ...

This is the continuation of the previous chapter, [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter IX The Confessional](#).

1 Rome's Teaching Concerning Purgatory

The Roman Catholic Church has developed a doctrine in which it is held that all who die at peace with the church, but who are not perfect, must undergo penal and purifying suffering in an intermediate realm known as purgatory. Only those believers who have attained a state of Christian perfection go immediately to heaven. All unbaptized adults and those who after baptism have committed mortal sin go immediately to hell. The great mass of partially sanctified Christians dying in fellowship with the church, but who nevertheless are encumbered with some degree of sin, go to purgatory where, for a longer or shorter time, they suffer until all sin is purged away, after which they are translated to heaven.

The Roman Church holds that baptism removes all previous guilt, both original and actual, so that if a person were to die immediately after baptism he would go directly to heaven. All other believers, except the Christian martyrs but including even the highest clergy, must go to purgatory to pay the penalty for sins committed after baptism. The sacrifices made by the martyrs, particularly those that reflect honor upon the church, are considered adequate substitutes for the purgatorial sufferings.

The doctrine of purgatory is not based on the Bible, but on a distinction which Rome makes by dividing sin into two kinds. This distinction is clearly set forth by Dr. Zacchello, who says:

"According to Roman teaching a person can commit two kinds of sin against God: *mortal* and *venial*. By mortal sin is meant a grave offense against the law of God or of the church. It is called 'mortal' because it kills the soul by depriving it entirely of sanctifying grace. Venial sin is a small and pardonable offense against God and the laws of the church. Then, this confusing and unscriptural doctrine continues: Two kinds of punishment are due to mortal sin, eternal (in hell forever), and temporal (in purgatory). Eternal punishment is cancelled by the sacraments of baptism and penance or by an act of perfect contrition with promise of confession. Temporal punishment is not cancelled by these sacraments, but by works of penance, by almsgiving, by paying the priest to say mass, by indulgences, etc., which

reduce the temporal punishment for mortal sins that would have to be suffered in purgatory. Thus even if all mortal sins of a Roman Catholic are forgiven in confession by a priest, and he does not perform enough of these 'good works,' he will go to purgatory and remain there in torture until his soul is completely purified" (*Secrets of Romanism*, p. 101).

The doctrine of purgatory rests on the assumption that while God forgives sin, His justice nevertheless demands that the sinner must suffer the full punishment due to him for his sin before he will be allowed to enter heaven. But such a distinction is illogical even according to human reasoning. For it manifestly would be unjust to forgive a criminal the guilt of his crime and still send him to prison to suffer for it.

The Roman Catholic people are taught that the souls of their relatives and friends in purgatory suffer great torment in the flames, that they are unable to help themselves, that not even God can help them until His justice has been satisfied, and that only their friends on earth can shorten or alleviate that suffering. Purgatory is supposed to be under the special jurisdiction of the pope, and it is his prerogative as the representative of Christ on earth to grant indulgences (i.e., relief from suffering) as he sees fit. This power, it is claimed, can be exercised directly by the pope to alleviate, shorten, or terminate the sufferings, and within limits it is also exercised by the priests as representatives of the pope. It is, of course, impossible but that power of this kind could be abused even in the hands of the best of men. Vested in the hands of ordinary men, as generally must be the case, or in the hands of mercenary and wicked men as too often has happened, the abuses are bound to be appalling. The evils that have flowed from this doctrine, and which are its inevitable consequences, make it abundantly clear that it cannot be of divine origin.

2 The Terrifying Aspect of Purgatory

Since none but actual saints escape the pains of purgatory, this doctrine gives to the death and funeral of the Roman Catholic a dreadful and repellent aspect. Under the shadow of such a doctrine, death is not, as in evangelical Protestantism, the coming of Christ for His loved one, but the ushering of the shrinking soul into a place of unspeakable torture. It is no wonder that millions of people born in the Roman Catholic Church, knowing practically nothing about the Bible but believing implicitly in the doctrines of their church, should live and die in fear of death, in fear of spending an unknown number of years in the pain and anguish of that place called purgatory. How tragic that these people live in fear and servitude to the priests, who they are taught to believe hold in their hands the power of life and death, when all the time Christ has paid for their redemption in full. Even their own Roman Catholic Bible says: "Wherefore because children have blood and flesh in common, so he in like manner has shared in these; that through death he might destroy him who had the empire of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver them, who throughout their life were kept in servitude by the fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15, Confraternity Version). These words, "Kept in servitude by the fear of death," describe the spiritual state of even devout Roman Catholics. All their lives they are kept in bondage through fear of

this imaginary purgatory.

The sufferings in purgatory are said to vary greatly in intensity and duration, being proportioned to the guilt and impurity or impenitence of the sufferer. They are described as being in some cases comparatively light and mild, lasting perhaps only a few hours, while in others little if anything short of the torments of hell itself and lasting for thousands of years. They differ from the pains of hell at least to this extent, that there is eventually an end to the sufferings in purgatory, but not to those in hell. They are in any event to end with the last judgment. Hence purgatory eventually is to be emptied of all its victims.

As regards the intensity of the suffering, Bellarmine, a noted Roman Catholic theologian, says:

"The pains of purgatory are very severe, surpassing anything endured in this life."

The Manual of the Purgatorial Society, with the imprimatur of Cardinal Hayes, says:

"According to the Holy Fathers of the Church, the fire of purgatory does not differ from the fire of hell, except in point of duration. 'It is the same fire,' says St. Thomas Aquinas, 'that torments the reprobate in hell, and the just in purgatory. The least pain in purgatory,' he says, 'surpasses the greatest suffering in this life.' Nothing but the eternal duration makes the fire of hell more terrible than that of purgatory."

And in another book with the imprimatur of archbishop Spellman (now cardinal), Bellarmine is quoted as saying:

"There is absolutely no doubt that the pains of purgatory in some cases endure for entire centuries" (John M. Haffert, *Saturday in Purgatory*).

It seems that the Church of Rome has rather wisely refrained from making any official pronouncement concerning the nature and intensity of purgatorial suffering. Books and discourses intended for Protestant readers or hearers speak of it only in the mildest terms. But the Roman Church does not thereby escape responsibility, for it has always allowed free circulation, with its expressed or implied sanction, of books containing the most frightening descriptions, ranging all the way from comparatively mild disciplinary measures to a burning lake of billowing flames in which the souls of the impenitent are submerged. Among their own people and in the hands of the priests the doctrine of purgatory has been an instrument of terrifying power. We are reminded of the remark of Charles Hodge in this connection: "The feet of the tiger with its claws withdrawn are as soft as velvet; but when those claws are extended, they are fearful instruments of laceration and death."

Furthermore, as Dr. Augustus H. Strong has appropriately said:

"Suffering has in itself no reforming power. Unless accompanied by special renewing influences of the Holy Spirit, it only hardens and embitters the soul. We have no Scriptural evidence that such influences of the Spirit are

exerted after death, upon the still impenitent; but abundant evidence on the contrary, that the moral condition in which death finds men is their condition forever. ... To the impenitent and rebellious sinner the motive must come, not from within, but from without. Such motives God presents by His Spirit in this life; and when this life ends and God's Spirit is withdrawn, no motive to repentance will be presented. The soul's dislike for God (we may even say, the sinner's hatred for God) will issue only in complaint and resistance" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 1041).

We ask: How can spirits suffer the pains of material fire in purgatory before they have resurrection bodies? In answer to this question the Roman theologians have invented a theory that in purgatory the soul takes on a different kind of body—the nature of which they do not define—in which the suffering can be felt. But that is like the doctrine of purgatory itself, a purely fictitious assumption without any Scripture proof whatever, and in fact contrary to Scripture.

Roman Catholicism is often described as a religion of fear. The doctrine of purgatory is where much of that fear centers—fear of the priest, fear of the confessional, of the consequences of missing mass, of the discipline of penance, of death of purgatory, and of the righteous judgment of an angry God. L. H. Lehmann tells us concerning his boyhood in Ireland: "A sense of constant fear overshadowed everything. Ingrained fear is, in fact, the predominant note running through the life of all children born and reared in Catholic Ireland. Few ever get rid of it completely in after life, even in America. That fear concerns everything in this life on earth, and still more terrible is the fear of the terrors in the life beyond the grave" (*The Soul of a Priest*, p. 34).

3 The Money Motive in the Doctrine of Purgatory

It is safe to say that no other doctrine of the Church of Rome, unless it be that of auricular confession, has done so much to pervert the Gospel or to enslave the people to the priesthood as has the doctrine of purgatory. A mere reference to the days of Tetzel, Luther, and the Protestant Reformation, not to mention present day conditions in the Roman Catholic countries in Southern Europe and Latin America where that church has had undisputed ecclesiastical control for centuries, is sufficient to illustrate this point. Every year millions of dollars are paid to obtain relief from this imagined suffering. No exact figures are available. In contrast with the custom in Protestant churches, in which itemized financial statements of income and expenses are issued each year, Roman Catholic finances are kept secret, no kind of budget or balance sheet ever being published which would show where their money comes from, how much it amounts to, how much is sent to Rome, how or where the remainder is spent. In this as in other things, the people must trust their church implicitly.

The doctrine of purgatory has sometimes been referred to as "the gold mine of the priesthood" since it is the source of such lucrative income. The Roman Church might well say, "By this craft we have our wealth."

In general it is held that the period of suffering in purgatory can be

shortened by gifts of money, prayers by the priest, and masses, which gifts, prayers, and masses can be provided by the person before death or by relatives and friends after death. The more satisfaction one makes while living, the less remains to be atoned for in purgatory.

At the time of death the priest is summoned to the bed of the dying person. He administers extreme unction, and solemnly pronounces absolution. Yet after death occurs, money is extracted from the mourning relatives and friends to pay for masses to be said in order to shorten the period of torment in purgatory. The result, particularly among ignorant and uneducated people, has been that the Roman Church sells salvation for money, not outwardly and directly, but nevertheless in reality. All understand that the service of the church in securing the salvation of a soul in purgatory is to be rewarded with appropriate gifts or services. It has well been said that the Roman Church is a huge money-gathering institution, and that everything in Rome has a price tag on it.

It is due in no small measure to this doctrine of purgatory that the Roman Catholic Church has been able to amass large sums of money and to build magnificent cathedrals, monasteries, and convents, even in regions where the people are poor. This has been particularly true in the Latin American countries. It is a common experience in Mexico, for instance, to find in almost every town an impressive Roman Catholic church surrounded by the miserable huts of the natives. The practical outworking of the system has been seen in several countries, e.g., France, England, Italy, Austria, Mexico and others when a disproportionately large amount of property fell into the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, sometimes as much as a fourth or a third of all the property of the nation, and had to be confiscated and redistributed by the government in order to redress the economic situation. There is literally no limit to the amount of property that the Roman Church seeks for itself if it is not restrained. Those who contribute money for masses, particularly those who at the urging of the priests leave substantial portions of their estates to the Roman Church so that future masses can be said for them, are helping to keep in being a lucrative and detestable system which did not become a regular practice in the church until centuries after the time of Christ and which is a disgrace to Christianity.

At this point another question arises. If the pope, or the priest acting for him, really has the power to shorten or modify or terminate the suffering of souls in purgatory, why does he not, if he is a good man, render that service freely and willingly as a Christian service to humanity? In the hospitals the doctors and nurses try in every possible way to relieve the pain and misery of those who come to them. Why does the pope, or the priest, keep those poor souls suffering horrible pain in the fire if at any time he can pay all their debt out of his rich treasury of the merits of the saints? Why? Does Romanism have an answer?

If any one of us actually had the power to release souls from purgatory and refused to exercise that power except in return for a payment of money, he would be considered cruel and unchristian—which indeed he would be. By all Christian standards that is a service that the church should render freely and willingly to its people. No decent man would permit even a dog to suffer

in the fire until its owner paid him five dollars to take it out. The insistence on a money transaction before a soul can be released, and sometimes money transactions over long periods of time, shows clearly the sinister purpose for which the doctrine of purgatory is invented. The simple fact is that if purgatory were emptied and all those suffering souls admitted to heaven, there would be little incentive left for the people to pay money to the priests. The doctrine of purgatory is a horribly cruel doctrine in that the priests, all of whom in the United States at least, are educated, intelligent men, know how flimsy or how utterly lacking is all actual evidence for such a place. Under the pretense of delivering souls from that suffering, large sums of money are wrung from the bereaved at a time when hearts are sore and when they are least able to think logically about such matters. Says Stephen L. Testa:

"Purgatory has been called 'a gigantic fraud,' and 'a colossal racket'; for it deprives the poor of their last pennies and extorts large funds from the rich in exchange for nothing. During the Middle Ages the rich rivaled each other in leaving their estates to the Church, and the poor gave out of their poverty till the Church became the richest landowner in every country. In several countries the Church owned one half of the land and one third of all the invested funds. It built great cathedrals and bishops' palaces and left the poor to live in huts and shanties. You can see even today in Europe and in Mexico great massive cathedrals surrounded by the hovels of the poor who grovel in misery, ignorance, and wretchedness.

"But many of those Catholic nations during the last century had their wars of independence, beginning with the French Revolution, and the Church was deprived of its temporal power and the landed properties were seized by the State and partitioned among the poor farmers. In Italy this happened in 1870. But Mussolini restored the temporal power of the pope (in name only) in 1929. However, the church is not the rich land owner that it once was. The spirit of liberty and democracy is fatal to the autocracy and totalitarianism of the Roman Church" (booklet, *The Truth About Catholics, Protestants, and Jews*, p. 14).

And Dr. Robert Ketcham asks:

"How do you know, Mr. Priest, when to stop praying and taking money from your parishioners for a given case? How do you know when John Murphy is out of purgatory? His getting out is dependent upon the saying of masses paid for by his bereaved ones. If you stop one or two masses too soon, what then? If you keep on saying masses for the fellow after he is out, that is bad. It is bad either way you come at it. I ask seriously, Sir, Mr. Roman Catholic Priest, How do you know when to stop saying masses for a given individual? Do you have some kind of a connection with the unseen world?" (booklet, *Let Rome Speak for Herself*, p. 20).

The fact is that Roman Catholic priests admit that they have no way of knowing when a soul is released from purgatory. One former layman from that church writing on this subject says that it was the priests' abuse of this doctrine that finally turned him against Roman Catholicism. He tells of an incident that occurred 45 years after the death of a man in his congregation

when the then officiating priest again asked the widow for money that he might say mass for her husband. A succession of priests in turn had taken money from that widow, always on the pretense of getting her husband out of purgatory. But they had never gotten him out. And there, 45 years later, they were still extracting money on that fraudulent claim.

We charge in the strongest terms that the practice of saying mass for souls in purgatory is a gigantic hoax and fraud, a taking of money under false pretenses, because it purports to get people out of purgatory when actually no such place exists. We would not trust a judge who manipulated the law to make himself rich, nor would we trust a policeman who asked for a bribe. Why, then, should we trust a priest who presents an interpretation concerning the afterlife which is not only not in the Bible but which is contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible? Such practice is fraudulent and is designed primarily for only one purpose, that of keeping the people under the power of the priests and controlling their lives and property as far as possible.

4 Scripture Teaching

That the doctrine of purgatory is unscriptural can be shown easily. The Bible says nothing about any such place, and in fact the most devastating arguments against purgatory come from those inspired pages. Christ made not even so much as a passing allusion to purgatory. Instead He said: "He that heareth my word, and believeth him that sent me, hath eternal life, and cometh not into judgment, but hath passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). Hence eternal life is already possessed by the soul that believes on Christ, and there can be no possible condemnation of that soul. When Jesus said to the penitent thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), the clear inference was that at his death he would go immediately to heaven. Christ's words, "It is finished" (John 19:30), spoken at the end of His suffering on the Cross, mean that the work of redemption which He came to perform has accomplished, finished, not partially, but completely. Furthermore, there is no transfer from one realm to another after death. Those who go to the place of outer darkness cannot cross from that sphere to the other: "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they that would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us" (Luke 16:26).

The Apostle John teaches the same: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin. ... If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7,9). Hence our sins, all of them, are forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ, and none are left to be purged away by human merit. And again: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; for their works follow with them" (Revelation 14:13).

Paul's teaching on this subject is quite full. He anticipated no purgatory, but said that to depart was to "be with Christ," and that it would be "very far better" (Philippians 1:23). While we are "at home in the body," we are "absent from the Lord"; but to be "absent from the body" is to be "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). To the Philippians he wrote: "For me to

live is Christ, and to die is gain" (1:21). In answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" he gives the straightforward and unqualified answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31)—no reference there to confession to a priest, penance, purgatory, or any other thing such as a religion of works attaches. Those who put their trust in Christ's atoning death do not come into judgment: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Peter, the alleged founder of Romanism, declared: "Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Hence we cannot be made to suffer for that sin a second time. And the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that God not only forgives, but pledges Himself never to bring our sins to His remembrance: "And their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (10:17).

What a contrast there is between these words of Scripture concerning the state of the righteous immediately after death, and that teaching which would have us believe that the sufferings of purgatory must be endured indefinitely, perhaps even for years! The Roman Church knows, of course, that this doctrine of purgatory, which is of such great importance to it, is not in the Bible. And that undoubtedly is one of the reasons that through the ages it has kept the Bible from the people.

Purgatory is, therefore, a travesty on the justice of God. God's justice has been fully satisfied once and for all by the sacrifice of Christ, and God cannot exact double punishment, once from Christ, and again from those for whom He died. Hence the redeemed soul goes not to any midway station between earth and heaven, but directly to heaven; and the sacrifice on Calvary was sufficient to "purge" all our sins without the need of any "purgatory."

A Roman Catholic cannot approach his deathbed and the certain prospect of the interminable fires of purgatory with anything other than fear and dread. For as he is true to the doctrines of his church he can see only great fires beyond. It is difficult to conceive of a belief so groundless and yet so frightening as that of the doctrine of purgatory. But what a marvelous, glorious thing it is at death to go straight to heaven! And what good news it is for Roman Catholics when they learn that there is no such place as purgatory, no suffering for the redeemed soul beyond the grave!

Where, then, does Rome find her authority for the doctrine of purgatory? Four Scripture verses are cited, but not one of them has any real bearing on the subject. They are (Confraternity Version): "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (the words of John the Baptist concerning Christ) (Matthew 3:11); "If his work burns, he will lose his reward, but himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15); "And some, who are judged, reprove; and others, save, snatching them from the fire" (Jude 1:22-23); and "Christ... [who] was brought to life in the spirit, in which also he went and preached to those spirits that were in prison. These in times past had been disobedient when the patience of God waited in the days of Noe while the ark was building. In that ark a few, that is, eight souls were saved through water" (1 Peter 3:18-20).

None of these verses mentions purgatory, nor gives any real ground for believing that such a place exists. 1 Peter 3:18-20 at first seems more plausible. But on closer examination these verses simply tell us that the Spirit through which Christ "was brought to life" (in the resurrection), which we believe refers to the Holy Spirit, was the same Spirit in which He preached to the people in Noah's day. The preaching referred to by Peter was long since past. It occurred while the ark was in process of construction, and the tragic thing about it is that only eight souls responded to that preaching. Those eight, and only those, were saved through water. Those who refused the testimony of the Spirit of Christ as He spoke through Noah were "those spirits that were in prison" (the American Standard Version translates more accurately: "the spirits in prison"), that is, in the prison house of sin, or in hell, at the time Peter wrote. And they still are imprisoned. These verses are, in brief, a warning against disobedience to God and rejection of the Gospel, but they have no bearing on the doctrine of purgatory. Thus the four passages cited by Roman Catholics surely are a very light cord on which to hang so heavy a weight.

But Rome bases her doctrine of purgatory primarily on a passage in Maccabees, which is a Jewish book written after the close of the Old Testament. It is, of course, an apocryphal writing, and is not acknowledged by Protestants as having any authority. In order to show how flimsy this evidence is we quote this passage in full:

"And the day following Judas (Maccabeus) came with his company, to take away the bodies of them that had been slain, and to bury them with their kinsmen, in the sepulchres of their fathers. And they found under the coats of the slain some of the donaries of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbiddeth to the Jews: so that all plainly saw, that for this cause they were slain. Then they all blessed the just judgment of the Lord, who had discovered the things that were hidden. And so betaking themselves to prayers, they besought him, that the sin which had been committed might be forgiven. But the most valiant Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves from sin, forasmuch as they saw before their eyes what had happened, because of the sins of those that were slain. And making a great gathering, he sent twelve thousand drachmas of silver to Jerusalem for a sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection. For if he had not hoped that they that were slain should rise again, it would have seemed superfluous and vain to pray for the dead. And because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness, had great grace laid up for them. It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins" (12:39-45, Douay Version).

But these verses really do not teach the doctrine at all. Nowhere in this passage is there any mention of fire in which souls are tormented. All that is mentioned is prayers for the dead, from which the Roman Catholic theologians infer, first, that such prayers are proper, and secondly, that such prayers can be effective for the salvation of the dead. Furthermore, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, these verses prove too much, for they teach the possible salvation of soldiers who had died in mortal sin, that of idolatry. And that contradicts Roman Catholic doctrine, which is that those

dying in mortal sin go straight to hell and are permanently lost. They do not go to purgatory where they can be aided by the prayers of people still on earth. Surely one who had never heard of purgatory would not learn about it from this passage. The word purgatory is not found here. This, again, is a precarious passage on which to build such an important doctrine.

5 History of the Doctrine

The germ of what afterward grew into the doctrine of purgatory is to be found in the idea of a purification by fire after death among ancients long before the time of Christ, particularly among the people of India and Persia. It was a familiar idea to the Egyptian and later to the Greek and Roman mind. Plato accepted the idea and gave expression to it in his philosophy. He taught that perfect happiness after death was not possible until one had made satisfaction for his sins, and that if his sins were too great his suffering would have no end. Following the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek influences spread through all the countries of western Asia, including Palestine. We have seen that it found expression in 2 Maccabees. The Rabbis began to teach that by means of sin offerings children could alleviate the sufferings of deceased parents. Later Jewish speculation divided the underworld into two abodes—paradise, a place of happiness, and Gehenna, a place of torment.

We need only read church history to discover how this doctrine developed by slow processes into its present form. In the early Christian era, following the Apostolic age, the writings of Marcion and the Shepherd of Hermes (second century) set forth the first statement of a doctrine of purgatory, alleging that Christ after His death on the cross went to the underworld and preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19) and led them in triumph to heaven. Prayers for the dead appear in the early Christian liturgies and imply the doctrine since they suggest that the state of the dead is not yet fixed. Origen, the most learned of the early church fathers (died A.D. 254), taught, first, that a purification by fire was to take place after the resurrection, and second, a universal restoration, a purifying by fire at the end of the world through which all men and angels were to be restored to favor with God.

In the writings of Augustine (died A.D. 430) the doctrine of purgatory was first given definite form, although he himself expressed doubt about some phases of it. It was, however, not until the sixth century that it received formal shape at the hands of Gregory the Great, who held the papal office from A.D. 590 to 604. Thereafter eschatology entered upon what we may term its mythological phase, during the period of history known as the Dark Ages. The invisible world was divided into heaven and purgatory, with the imagination attempting to portray as vividly as possible the topography and experiences of each region. The doctrine was proclaimed an article of faith in 1439 by the Council of Florence, and was later confirmed by the Council of Trent in 1548. But does any intelligent person believe that if such a place as purgatory is described in the Bible it would have taken the church fathers 600 years to discover it and another 1,000 years to confirm it? At any rate, the Protestant Reformation swept away those creations of terror and fancy, and reverted to the Scriptural antithesis of heaven and hell. The Eastern

Orthodox Church, incidentally, does not teach the doctrine of purgatory.

The following paragraph by Dr. Charles Hodge shows the influence that this doctrine had in the lives and thinking of all classes of people during the Middle Ages:

"It was Gregory the Great who consolidated the vague and conflicting views circulating through the church, and brought the doctrine into shape and into such connection with the discipline of the church, as to render it the effective engine of government and income, which it has ever since remained. From this time onward through all the Middle Ages, purgatory became one of the prominent and consistently reiterated topics of public discussion. It took firm hold of the popular mind. The clergy from the highest to the lowest, and the different orders of monks vied with each other in their zeal for its inculcation, and in the marvels which they related of spiritual apparitions, in support of the doctrine. They contended fiercely for the honor of superior power of redeeming souls from purgatorial pains. The Franciscans claimed that the head of their order descended annually into purgatory, and delivered all the brotherhood who were detained there. The Carmelites asserted that the Virgin Mary had promised that no one who died with the Carmelite scapulary upon their shoulders, should ever be lost. The chisel and pencil of the artist were employed in depicting the horrors of purgatory, as means of impressing the public mind. No class escaped the contagious belief; the learned as well as the ignorant; the high and the low; the soldier and the recluse; the skeptic and the believer were alike enslaved. From this slavery the Bible, not the progress of science, has delivered Protestants. ... All experience proves that infidelity is no protection against superstition. If men will not believe the rational and true, they will believe the absurd and false" (Systematic Theology, III, p. 770).

Dr. Harris says:

"It is well to remember that the doctrine of purgatory which rests like a heavy burden upon the heart of every Roman Catholic was not taught by any of the early church fathers and had a very slow growth until the fifth century. Its beginnings in prayers for the dead and a difference in status between the martyred dead and the ordinary Christian departed may be found as early as A.D. 200 in Tertullian. Mention of the penal fires comes much later, and the masses for the poor souls in purgatory still later. The doctrine of purgatory is another one of those foreign growths that has fastened itself like a malignant tumor upon the theology of the Roman Catholic Church" (Fundamental Protestant Doctrines, V, p. 7).

And Alexander Hislop, in his exhaustive study of the origin of Roman Catholic doctrines, finds that the doctrine of purgatory was adopted from paganism—from Babylonian, Greek, and Roman mythology:

"In every system except that of the Bible the doctrine of a purgatory after death, and prayers for the dead, has always been found to occupy a place. Go wherever we may, in ancient or modern times, we shall find that Paganism leaves hope after death for sinners, who, at the time of their departure,

were consciously unfit for the abodes of the blest. For this purpose a middle state has been feigned, in which, by means of purgatorial pains guilt unremoved in time may in a future world be purged away, and the soul be made meet for final beatitude. In Greece the doctrine of purgatory was inculcated in the very chief of the philosophers (Plato). ... In pagan Rome, purgatory was equally held up before the minds of men.

"In Egypt, substantially the same doctrine of purgatory was inculcated. But when once this doctrine of purgatory was admitted into the popular mind, then the door was opened for all manner of priestly extortions. Prayers for the dead ever go hand in hand with purgatory; but no prayers can be completely efficacious without the interposition of the priests; and no priestly functions can be rendered unless there be special pay for them. Therefore, in every land we find the pagan priesthood 'devouring widows' houses,' and making merchandise of the tender feelings of sorrowing relatives, sensitively alive to the immortal happiness of the beloved dead" (*The Two Babylons*, p. 168).

6 Conclusion

As we have indicated, there is surprisingly little revealed in Scripture concerning the intermediate state. This has led some to resort to conjecture and imagination in order to fill out the picture that revelation has given only in the barest outline.

The Roman Catholic theologian Newman cites the doctrine of purgatory as one of the clearest instances of "development" from a slight Scriptural germ. But in reality it is an instance of the development from a germ of that which was never in it to begin with—as if from a mustard seed one could derive an oak tree.

In defense of this doctrine Roman Catholics lay considerable stress upon the fact that the custom of praying for the dead prevailed early and long in the church. Such prayers, it is said, take for granted that the dead need our prayers, and that they are not immediately in heaven. But the fact is that prayer for the dead is merely another superstitious practice which is entirely without Scriptural support. That was one of the many corruptions introduced into the church from heathenism. It will not do to argue from one corruption to support another.

One thing that has given the doctrine of purgatory a certain amount of plausibility is the fact that we all are sinners and none attain perfect holiness in this life, while heaven is a place of perfect holiness where nothing evil can enter. The question naturally arises, How is the soul cleansed from the last remnants of sin before it enters heaven? Since this deals with something that is outside the realm of our experience it might seem reasonable to believe that there would be a place of further purification. In this case the Bible is our only trustworthy source of information. But a careful examination of all the passages relating to this subject show that there are only two abodes for the dead—a heaven for the saved, and a hell for the lost. And in response to the question as to how the Christian is made ready for heaven, the Bible teaches that perfect

righteousness is not to be had by any process at all, but only through faith in Christ (Galatians 2:16). We are not justified by the works of the law. As expressed in the Westminster standards: "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." And if it be doubted that holiness can be attained in a single moment, let it be remembered that recovery from disease is ordinarily a process but that when Christ said, "I will; be thou made clean," even the leper was cleansed in an instant (Matthew 8:3).

Belief that one can maintain contact with the dead, and that he can influence them for good or bad, has been a common element in the pagan religions. When the Israelites came into the land of Canaan, Moses strictly charged them that they were not to follow the customs of the land in making gifts to or sacrificing for the dead, nor were they to allow any marks to be made in their flesh to appease or facilitate contact with the spirits of the dead. In Deuteronomy 26:13-14 we read: "And thou shalt say before Jehovah thy God, I have put away the hallowed things [objects of heathen veneration and worship] out of my house. ... I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I put away thereof, being unclean nor given thereof for the dead." The Roman practice of gifts for the dead and prayers to and for the dead (to Mary and the saints and for deceased relatives and friends) is not far removed, if indeed it is removed at all, from such customs.

Mr. Norman Porter, of Belfast, Northern Ireland, tells of a conversation that occurred during a visit to a Roman Catholic monastery in connection with a course of instruction offered on Roman Catholic beliefs. "I asked the priest, 'Sir, when you die, where do you hope to go?' He replied, 'I hope that when I die I shall go at least to the lowest place in purgatory. That was his hope. I said, 'Tell me, when the pope dies, where will he go?' He said, 'He will be just as I am. He hopes that he will go to purgatory.' I said, 'The so-called Vicar of Christ, the man who has claimed for himself the right to represent Christ on earth, is going to purgatory?' He said, 'Yes.' I then said, 'Sir, when do you get out of purgatory? When will you be in heaven?' He answered, 'I don't know.' So not even the Roman priests know when a soul escapes from this mysterious place. What a message for a perishing world!"

Furthermore, the doctrine of purgatory represents God as a respecter of persons, which the Bible says He is not. Because of money a rich man can leave more for prayers and masses and so pass through purgatory and into heaven more speedily than many a poor man who is more deserving and who has more to commend him in the sight of God. The Bible teaches that God's judgment is based on character alone, not on outward circumstances of wealth, position, or special standing.

This doctrine turns to commercial gain the sorrow of relatives and friends for their departed loved ones and prolongs indefinitely the hold of the priest over the guilty fears and hopes of people which otherwise would end at death. It is not difficult to imagine the anguish in the heart of a devout Roman Catholic who accepts the teachings of his church and believes that his father or mother, son or daughter, is suffering in the flames of purgatory. Millions of people are steeped in that superstitious system, and those who sincerely believe it will do almost anything to provide relief. It is not strange that the Roman Church accumulates wealth.

What a striking contrast there is between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic funeral! For the Protestant, death is his promotion to glory and his coronation. He has gone to heaven to be with Christ. He has preceded us to the Father's house. We gather not primarily to mourn a loss, but to celebrate a victory. The Scriptures are read, and the words of Christ comfort our hearts: "Let not your hearts be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." And the words of Paul, such as these: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain... having the desire to depart, and be with Christ; for it is very far better"; "...willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at with the Lord"; etc. Christian hymns about heaven are sung, such as "Safe in the arms of Jesus"; "O think of the home over there"; "When we all get to heaven"; "And I shall see Him face to face, and tell the story, 'Saved by grace'"; "Beyond the sunset"—hymns which speak of heaven as our home. Then words of comfort and consolation are spoken to the bereaved family, words of inspiration and warning to the congregation, urging them to accept Christ as Savior and to walk in His way as He is the way that leads to heaven.

But how different is the Roman Catholic funeral! We quote the words of Stephen L. Testa as he describes a funeral that he attended recently:

"It was a high requiem mass, with three priests officiating, all in black robes chanting a dirge of penitential psalms in Latin, in lugubrious tones which heighten the wailing and crying of the bereaved family especially if they come from Latin countries. The friends of the family read the prayer on the prayer card given to them at the door by the undertaker, praying to Jesus to have mercy on the soul of the deceased and release it soon from the 'devouring flames' (of purgatory) where it is supposed to be imprisoned. At one point during the mass the priest will sprinkle the casket with holy water and pronounce the 'absolution of the dead,' and then he will fumigate it with sweet smelling burning incense, walking around the casket or catafalque, mumbling Latin prayers.

"No hymns about heaven are sung. It is a fact that *Catholic prayer books have no songs about heaven*.¹ And no sermon or words of consolation are spoken by the priest to the bereaved family, for the whole service is intended to appease God, that He may have mercy on the soul of the deceased and deliver him soon from the flames of purgatory. If any words are spoken in English it is to induce the friends of the bereaved family to pay for more requiem masses to be said in the future at \$5.00 per, for the refreshment and repose of that soul in purgatory."

¹ The new Roman Catholic hymnal of 1965 includes some Protestant hymns which speak of heaven.

The strong public sentiment that is found everywhere against obtaining money under false pretenses should apply to the Roman Catholic priests who extort money from deceived relatives for prayers and masses which they pretend will better the condition of the dead. And the church that maintains this species of dishonesty should be held in disrepute and contempt by all honest people regardless of denominational differences.

Our conclusion, therefore, after an extensive survey of the doctrine of purgatory is that it is not in the Bible, that it is a human invention and contrary to what the Bible teaches. Redeemed souls are cleansed, not by the fires of purgatory, but by the blood of Christ and in this present life; for the Bible says, "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7)—thereby eliminating once and for all any need for such a horrible place as purgatory. We do not say that any person who believes in purgatory cannot be a Christian. Experience shows that Christians as well as unbelievers sometimes are very inconsistent, that they may accept without thinking it through a doctrine or theory that is contrary to what the Bible teaches and to what their hearts know to be true. But how thankful we should be that we are not under the false teaching of a misguided church or priesthood that threatens us with the torments of purgatory, that instead we have the assurance that at death we go immediately to heaven and enter into its joys.

(Continued in [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Section Three Chapter XI The Infallibility of the Pope](#))

All chapters of Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner

- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter I Introduction](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter II The Church](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter III The Priesthood](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter IV Tradition](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter V Peter](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Section Two Chapter VI The Papacy](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter VII Mary Part 1](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter VII Mary Part 2](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter VIII The Mass](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter IX The Confessional](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter X Purgatory](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Section Three Chapter XI The Infallibility of the Pope](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XII Penance, Indulgences: Salvation by Grace or by Works?](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XIII Ritualism](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XIV Celibacy](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XV Marriage](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Section Four Chapter XVI The Parochial School](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XVII By What Moral Standard?](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XVIII Intolerance, Bigotry, Persecution](#)
- [Roman Catholicism By Lorraine Boettner Chapter XIX A System Tested by its Fruits](#)