35. Purgatory, prayer for the dead, indulgences

Often heard: "Purgatory isn't in the Bible. 'Absent from the body, present with the Lord.' Indulgences were selling salvation."
Also heard: "Christians prayed for the dead from the earliest centuries. Why would they, if the dead cannot be helped?"

Straight to Christ: no purification after death

HELD BY Lutheran prayer not forbidden · Reformed · Anglican Article XXII · Methodist · Baptist

Christ's blood cleanses from all sin, so at death believers go straight to be with Him. There is no purification after death, and indulgences sold forgiveness.

VERSES CITED

Heb 9:27; 10:14, 17–18; 1 John 1:7, 9; Rom 8:1; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:21–23; Luke 23:43; Isa 1:18; Rev 14:13.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Aerius (4th century) denied the value of prayer for the dead and was condemned as a heretic by Epiphanius (*Panarion* 75). The Waldensians (12th–13th centuries) rejected purgatory, and Eastern bishops objected at Florence (1438–45). Luther's 95 Theses (1517) attacked indulgence abuses; he rejected purgatory itself by 1530. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.5.6–10.

Final purification before heaven (purgatory)

HELD BY Catholic

Those who die in God's grace but not yet fully purified undergo a final purification before heaven. It is not a second chance and not for unforgiven mortal sin; it completes Christ's work, since nothing unclean enters heaven. Forgiveness of guilt can leave temporal consequences, as with David. Indulgences remit temporal punishment, never sin itself, by drawing on the merits of Christ and the saints, and they cannot be bought. The selling of indulgences was an abuse the Church condemned: Trent (1562–63) abolished the indulgence preachers, and Pius V (1567) banned any indulgence tied to a fee.

VERSES CITED

2 Macc 12:42–46; Matt 5:25–26; 12:32; 1 Cor 3:11–15; 1 Pet 3:18–20; 4:6; Rev 21:27; Heb 12:14, 23; 2 Sam 12:13–14; 2 Tim 1:16–18 (Paul's prayer for Onesiphorus, apparently dead); Matt 16:19.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

The epitaph of Abercius (c. 190) asks readers to pray for him. Perpetua (203) prays for her dead brother Dinocrates. Tertullian (*The Crown* 3; *On Monogamy* 10) describes offerings for the dead on their anniversaries. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 5.9–10. Augustine

prays for his mother Monica (*Confessions* 9.13) and speaks of purifying punishment after death (*City of God* 21.13, 21.24; *Enchiridion* 69, 110). Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.39 (c. 594).

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 958, 1030–1032, 1471–1479; Councils of Lyons II (1274), Florence (1439) and Trent, Session 25 (1563); Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967).

Prayer for the departed, without purgatory

HELD BY Orthodox

Until the resurrection the righteous have a foretaste of bliss, while those who departed with faith but without bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance may be helped towards a blessed resurrection by the Church's prayers, above all those offered with the bloodless sacrifice of the Eucharist, and by works of mercy done in their memory. This is not purgatory: there is no purifying fire before the Last Judgment and no satisfaction paid by temporal punishment, and the Church has no doctrine of indulgences; souls are released from a place of darkness and sorrow by prayer, the Eucharist and charity, not by fire.

VERSES CITED

2 Macc 12:43; Matt 12:32; Luke 16:22; Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:8.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Prayer for the departed has a fixed place in the Divine Liturgy, which Philaret's Catechism traces to the Liturgy of St James, and Cyril of Jerusalem (Mystagogical Catecheses 5.9) speaks of its great benefit when the Sacrifice is offered. At Ferrara in June 1438 Mark of Ephesus and

Bessarion of Nicaea answered the Latin definition in writing; as Ivan Ostroumoff's history reports Bessarion's explanation, the Greeks held that souls are freed "by means of prayers, the Holy Eucharist, and deeds of charity, and not by fire."

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Longer Catechism of St Philaret, Q 372-377; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 18; Greek reply on purgatory at Ferrara (14 June 1438), in Ivan Ostroumoff, The History of the Council of Florence, tr. Basil Popoff (Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1971), pp. 47-60 (orthodoxinfo.com, "The Orthodox Response to the Latin Doctrine of Purgatory"); Mark of Ephesus, First Homily on Purgatorial Fire (1438).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholics hold that those who die in God's grace but not yet fully purified undergo a final purification before heaven, that the prayers and Masses of the living help them, and that indulgences remit temporal punishment, never guilt, and cannot be bought. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 958, 1030–1032, 1471–1479; Council of Trent, Session 25 (1563), Decrees on Purgatory and on Indulgences.

Orthodox

The Orthodox pray for the departed in every Divine Liturgy, believing such prayer helps them. Philaret's Catechism teaches that those who died in faith without bearing fruits of repentance may be aided towards a blessed resurrection by prayers, the Eucharist and works of mercy. The Confession of Dositheus (1672) speaks of punishment in Hades relieved by priests' prayers, alms and the Liturgy, but Mark of Ephesus rejected the Latin purgatorial fire at Florence, and Orthodoxy has no doctrine of indulgences, though under Ottoman rule the Greek patriarchs issued absolution certificates (synchorochartia), a practice Dositheus defended as ancient custom and a synod of Constantinople confirmed in 1727.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, Q 372–373, 376–377; Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), Decree 18 (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* vol. 2); Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos), *Life after Death*, on St Mark of Ephesus at Florence, sections 3–6; S. Govorun, "Indulgences in the history of the Greek Church" (OrthoChristian.com, 2004).

Lutheran

Lutherans reject purgatory together with every rite and trade attached to it, and the indulgences granted "only for money" to the living and the dead (Smalcald Articles). The Apology denies that Masses applied to the dead remit punishment, since the Supper was instituted for the remission of guilt and requires faith. Yet of the ancients' prayer for the dead it says "we do not prohibit" it, and rejects the charge that Lutherans share the condemned view of Aerius.

Sources: Smalcald Articles II.2.12–14, 24; Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV.89–96.

Reformed

The Westminster Confession teaches that at death the souls of the righteous, made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, and that besides heaven and hell "the Scripture acknowledgeth none"; prayer is for the living "but not for the dead." Calvin called purgatory "a deadly device of Satan," treated it with indulgences as false supplements to Christ's satisfaction, and judged the early custom of praying for the dead a concession to popular custom, not to be imitated.

Sources: Westminster Confession of Faith 21.4, 32.1; Westminster Larger Catechism Q 183; Calvin, *Institutes* 3.5 (title), 3.5.6, 3.5.10.

Anglican

Article XXII rejects "the Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons" as without warrant in Scripture. The 1662 burial office commits the body "in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection" and prays that "we, with all those that are departed in the true faith" may have perfect bliss: a general prayer, not a petition for a soul's release. Evangelicals cite the Homily concerning Prayer, which tells readers not to "dream either of purgatory, or of prayer for the souls" of the dead; Anglo-Catholics pray for the dead outright, and the American 1928 Prayer Book asks God to grant the departed "continual growth in thy love and service."

Methodist

Methodist Article XIV rejects the "Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardon" as repugnant to the Word of God. Wesley nonetheless kept a general prayer "for the faithful departed" in his forms of prayer, defending it from "the earliest antiquity, by the Church of England, and by the Lord's Prayer" and the Burial Service, while charging Rome with corrupting it into prayer for those who die in their sins. The United Methodist Church gives no doctrinal teaching on the intermediate state beyond rejecting purgatory.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles, Article XXII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), The Order for the Burial of the Dead (committal; prayer "Almighty God, with whom do live the spirits"); Book of Common Prayer (Episcopal Church, 1928), Holy Communion, Prayer for the whole state of Christ's Church; Second Book of Homilies (1571), "An Homily or Sermon concerning Prayer," part 3.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion, Article XIV; Wesley, Second Letter to the author of *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* [Bishop Lavington] (c. 1751), in Wesley Corpus (Letters 1751); United Methodist Communications, "Ask The UMC: What happens after a person dies?" (1 October 2019).

Baptist

Baptists and evangelicals hold that Christ's blood cleanses believers from all sin, so at death they go straight to be with Him, with no purification afterward, and that indulgences sold forgiveness. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Heb 9:27; 10:14; 1 John 1:7; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:21–23.

Where it gets contested: Those who reject purgatory (Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists) answer that 2 Maccabees is not Scripture (see the canon topic) and that 1 Cor 3 is about rewards for ministers' work. The noun "purgatory" appears only in the 12th century. Catholics and Orthodox, who pray for the dead, reply that this practice is universal by about 200 and makes sense only if the dead can be helped.

See also: Classic arguments 88–95

Deeper study: guilt and temporal consequences, the key texts, and Augustine and Gregory

The distinction on which the Catholic doctrine rests, the texts every position must account for, and how those who affirm and those who reject purgatory read each other's. It does not decide between them.

The Catholic distinction

Catholic theology distinguishes:

- **eternal guilt / eternal punishment**, forgiven through Christ, and
- **temporal consequences or purification**, which may remain even after guilt is forgiven.

Purgatory applies only to those who die "in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified," who "are indeed assured of their eternal salvation" (CCC 1030). It is therefore not, in

Catholic theology, a second chance for the damned, and it is "entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (CCC 1031).

The key texts

Texts Catholics cite

- **2 Macc 12:42–46** — Judas Maccabeus offers sacrifice for the dead: "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins" (12:46, Douay-Rheims).
- **Matt 12:32** — a sin that "shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come," which Gregory the Great and the Catechism take to imply that some sins are forgiven in the age to come (CCC 1031).
- **1 Cor 3:11–15** — each man's work is tried by fire; "he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."
- **Matt 5:25–26** — not coming out of prison until the last farthing is paid.
- **Rev 21:27; Heb 12:14** — "there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth"; holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord."
- **2 Tim 1:16–18** — Paul's prayer for Onesiphorus, apparently dead.

Texts Protestants cite

- **Heb 10:14, 17–18** — "by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."
- **1 John 1:7, 9** — "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."
- **Rom 8:1** — "no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."
- **Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:21–23** — "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise"; "absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord."
- **Heb 9:27; Rev 14:13** — death, then judgment; the dead who die in the Lord "rest from their labours."

How each position reads the other's texts

How Protestants read the Catholic texts

- **2 Maccabees:** Protestants do not accept the book as Scripture. Calvin declines to argue from it "lest I should seem to include that work among the canonical books," and adds that Judas is commended for his hope of the resurrection, not for paying a price of redemption (*Institutes* 3.5.8).
- **1 Cor 3:11–15:** the passage concerns the work ministers build on the foundation, which is tested on "the day"; Calvin reads the fire as the searching examination of the Holy Spirit, not a place of purging after death (*Institutes* 3.5.9).

- **Matt 12:32:** read as a strong way of saying that the sin will never be forgiven, not as teaching that other sins are forgiven after death.
- **Rev 21:27; Heb 12:14:** Protestants agree that nothing unclean enters heaven, but hold that believers are perfected at death: "The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens," and "Besides these two places ... the Scripture acknowledgeth none" (Westminster Confession 32.1).
- **Early prayer for the dead:** Calvin grants that the practice was old, but asks "by what word of God, by what revelation, by what example it was done?" (*Institutes* 3.5.10). The Anglican and Methodist Articles call the Roman doctrine of purgatory "a fond thing vainly invented," grounded on no warrant of Scripture (Thirty-Nine Articles XXII; Methodist Articles of Religion XIV).

How Catholics read the Protestant texts

- **Heb 10:14; 1 John 1:7:** Catholics agree that Christ's one sacrifice is the whole cause of cleansing; Christ accomplished salvation on the cross, "But that does not settle the question of how this redemption is applied to us." Purgatory is "the final phase of Christ's applying to us the purifying redemption" he won, not an added payment (Catholic Answers, "Purgatory").
- **Rom 8:1:** purgatory is not condemnation; those being purified are already "assured of their eternal salvation" (CCC 1030).
- **Heb 9:27:** read as the particular judgment at death, after which the soul is purified before heaven (Catholic Answers, "Purgatory").
- **Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23:** Catholics reply that these texts show the faithful dead are with Christ, but do not say that every believer is already fully purified at the moment of death; purgatory is a purification of the elect, not a separation from Christ.

Augustine and Gregory

Augustine did not describe a vision of souls suffering in fire. His *Enchiridion* (69, 110) and *City of God* (21.13, 21.24) treat purifying fire after death tentatively: whether some believers pass through "a kind of purgatorial fire" is "a matter that may be inquired into, and either ascertained or left doubtful" (*Enchiridion* 69). Yet he also writes that "temporary punishments are suffered by some in this life only, by others after death" (*City of God* 21.13), and he prayed for his mother at her request (*Confessions* 9.11, 9.13). Protestants point to his hesitation; Catholics to his acceptance of temporary punishment after death and of prayer for the dead. Gregory the Great (*Dialogues* 4.39–40, c. 594) holds that "before the day of judgment there is a Purgatory fire for certain small sins" and tells of the deacon Paschasius, purged after death; the more vivid pictures of purgatorial suffering come from later medieval visions and devotional literature.

What is actually in dispute

Whether, after the guilt of sin is forgiven, a need for purification or a temporal penalty can remain that is completed after death, or whether Christ's work and the believer's death leave nothing to be purged. Behind this lie two further questions: whether 2 Maccabees is Scripture, and whether the early Christian practice of prayer for the dead is apostolic Tradition or a later custom.

Deeper study: visions of purgatory, and what Church approval means

Catholic tradition holds many accounts of saints who saw souls in purgatory or were visited by them. They are popular in devotion, and critics often point to them as the real source of the doctrine. So it matters what the Church claims for them.

What approval does and does not mean

- Private revelations, even recognized ones, "do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith" (CCC 67).
- Benedict XIV taught that an approved revelation may be believed with human faith, but "an assent of Catholic faith is not due" to it (quoted in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's commentary on Fatima, 2000).
- Canonizing a saint does not certify the saint's visions. John Paul II wrote that the Church recognized Bridget of Sweden's holiness "without ever pronouncing on her individual revelations" (*Spes Aedificandi*, 1999). The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's 2024 norms on supernatural phenomena say the same (§13), and that even where a devotion is cleared, "the faithful are not obliged to give an assent of faith" (§12).
- The Council of Trent's decree on purgatory (Session XXV, 1563) told bishops to exclude "the more difficult and subtle questions" from popular preaching and not to allow "such things as are uncertain" to be made public.

None of the accounts below has been approved by a pope as a revelation that Catholics must believe. The approvals noted are of other kinds: a visionary canonized, a pope telling a story himself, a feast permitted, or a bishop's judgment on an apparition.

The main accounts

- **Perpetua (Carthage, c. 203).** In prison before her martyrdom she prays for her dead young brother, Dinocrates. She sees him first thirsty in "a gloomy place," then cleansed and drinking, "translated from the place of punishment" (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*). *Approval:* Perpetua is named in the Roman Canon of the Mass; the vision itself has none. Augustine noted that the account is not in canonical Scripture.

- **Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book IV (c. 593–594).** The pope writes that there is "a Purgatory fire for certain small sins" and tells of souls released after Masses were offered for them, among them the monk Justus, for whom Mass was said on thirty successive days: the origin of the custom of "Gregorian Masses." *Approval:* a pope telling the stories himself, in a book of edifying narratives, not a teaching document.
- **Mechtilde of Hackeborn (13th century)** pictures the place of purification as a mountain of seven terraces in her *Book of Special Grace*. *Approval:* her feast is kept in her order by permission of the Holy See; the book has no approval.
- **Nicholas of Tolentino (d. 1305).** According to his traditional Life, a dead friar asked him for Masses and, after seven days of them, told him that many souls had been set free; he is the traditional patron of the souls in purgatory. *Approval:* canonized by Eugene IV in 1446; the story itself has none.
- **Bridget of Sweden (d. 1373)** describes a soul's judgment and purgatory in her *Revelations* (Book IV, chapter 7). *Approval:* canonized by Boniface IX in 1391, and her *Revelations* were examined during the Council of Basel in the 15th century. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912) says Boniface IX approved them; John Paul II wrote in 1999 that the Church never pronounced on her individual revelations.
- **Catherine of Genoa (d. 1510)** wrote the *Treatise on Purgatory* (published 1551). *Approval:* canonized in 1737; the Holy Office examined her writings and found their doctrine sound. Benedict XVI noted that she "never received specific revelations on purgatory": the treatise is teaching drawn from her own spiritual life, not a vision.
- **Teresa of Ávila (1560s)** records in her *Life* that on All Souls' Day she "saw several souls coming out of purgatory," and that of the many souls she saw, only three escaped purgatory altogether. *Approval:* canonized in 1622 and named a Doctor of the Church in 1970; the visions themselves are not approved.
- **Margaret Mary Alacoque (17th century)** saw a Benedictine monk "all enveloped in flames" who asked her to offer three months of suffering for him. *Approval:* canonized in 1920.
- **Fatima (1917).** Lucia later wrote that when she asked about a girl named Amelia who had died, Our Lady answered that she would be in purgatory "until the end of the world." *Approval:* the Bishop of Leiria declared the apparitions worthy of belief in 1930, before Lucia wrote this memoir (1941); the saying itself has no specific approval.
- **Faustina Kowalska (1925)** describes being led to "a misty place full of fire" where suffering souls were visited by Our Lady (*Diary* 20). *Approval:* canonized by John Paul II in 2000. In 1959 the Holy Office restricted the Divine Mercy devotion in the form she proposed; the restriction was lifted in 1978.
- **The "Sabbatine Privilege."** A bull attributed to John XXII (1322) has Mary promising to free from purgatory, on the Saturday after their death, those who wore the Carmelite scapular. Scholars regard the bull as inauthentic. In 1613 the Holy Office allowed Carmelites to preach

only that the faithful "may piously believe" in Mary's help to souls after death, and forbade images of her descending into purgatory.

Where it gets contested: Protestants (Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists) see in these accounts the real engine of popular belief in purgatory, and argue that a doctrine kept alive by visions, Masses offered for the dead and indulgences is exactly what the sufficiency of Scripture guards against. Catholics answer that the doctrine rests on Scripture and Tradition (2 Macc 12:43–46; 1 Cor 3:15; the early Church's prayer for the dead), not on visions, which the Church treats as optional aids that no one is obliged to believe, and that Trent itself told preachers to keep uncertain matters out of the pulpit. Protestants reply that 2 Maccabees is not in their canon of Scripture and that 1 Cor 3:15 concerns the testing of each builder's work, not the purging of souls. The Orthodox pray for the dead but reject the Latin teaching on a purgatorial fire.

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