



The intermediate state – Purgatory

Having seen something of the Biblical teaching about the intermediate state, we cannot move on to the area of general eschatology until we answer some questions that still remain and which in one way or another relate to the intermediate state.

One question arose only a short time ago when a young member of our congregation asked about the teaching of the Church of Rome called *purgatory*. A Roman Catholic neighbor had died and much emphasis was being placed on saying masses so that he could be released from purgatory as soon as possible. Understandably, her question was "What is purgatory?"

The other issue we should consider is one which is sometimes even heatedly discussed: Are there degrees of punishments and rewards?

First, purgatory

This is a distinctively Roman Catholic teaching. It is a place of punishment — expiatory suffering. *The Baltimore Catechism No. 3* (q. 184) of the Roman Catholic Church puts it this way:

Who are punished in purgatory?

Those are punished for a time in purgatory who die in the state of grace but are guilty of venial sin, or have not fully satisfied for the temporal punishment due to their sins.

In notes added by the Rev. John A. O'Brien in the edition of this catechism called *Understanding the Catholic Faith* (Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind., 1955), we read:

There will be no purgatory after the general judgment. Since we do not know how long individual souls are detained in purgatory, there is need for persevering prayer for the repose of the souls of all those who die after reaching the use of reason, except those who are canonized or beatified by the Church. The souls in purgatory are certain of entering heaven as soon as God's justice has been fully satisfied (130).

For Rome, purgatory is a place where the baptized go after death. It is a temporary stop between this earthly existence and heaven. But why? The name, itself, tells us: *purgatory*. It is a place of purging or purification. But why is this purging necessary?

Rome teaches that even though through baptism the sinner has been purified completely and every debt of justice has been paid, still he sins. There are two kinds of actual sin: mortal and venial. The mortal sins are serious, conscious breakings of God's Law done with full consent which can only be removed through the Sacrament of Penance (individual confession and absolution done according to the rules of Vatican II). Unless they are removed, the sinner will be deprived of sanctifying grace and a right to everlasting happiness in hell. The venial sin

is a less serious offense against the law of God, which does not deprive the soul of sanctifying grace, and which can be pardoned even without sacramental Confession.

(Baltimore Catechism, q. 70)

These sins we always commit, Rome says, and these, though less serious, must be paid for in some way.

Perhaps the difference between mortal and venial sins can best be illustrated by these words from Rev. John A. O'Brien's *The Faith of Millions*:

...stealing is a sin; but if one steals merely a newspaper, it does not involve serious or grievous matter, and hence would be only a venial sin. If one were to steal a hundred dollars, however, the matter would be serious and the sin would be a mortal one (463).

According to Robert C. Broderick in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1976)

The purpose of purgatory is to cleanse one of imperfections, venial sins, and faults, and to remit or do away with the temporal punishment due to mortal sins that have been forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance. It is an intermediate state in which the departed souls can atone for unforgiven sins before receiving their final reward (502).

Thus purgatory is a place of punishment, but this punishment is understood as "pain of loss" or deprivation of the blessed sight of God. It is also physical pain. Strangely enough, it is *also* a place of joy. Rome says, just think of the pardon you receive. Remember the crown that awaits you. And don't forget the love which is expressed in the prayers offered in your behalf by the living.

By means of these prayers offered and masses said on behalf of those in purgatory, their stay is shortened and their sufferings relieved. Since no one is sure just exactly how long a departed member of the Roman Catholic Church has to stay for purging, prayers for the dead and masses said on their behalf are certainly encouraged. Of course, it should be added that the only way these masses can be said is if they are bought. Therefore, at death "spiritual bouquets" are given, often in place of flowers. These "spiritual bouquets" are sums of money given to the church in the name of the departed one so that the masses can be said. Then, when at last the purification is complete that soul is released and allowed to go to heaven for the duration of the intermediate state — if there is any.

Is this taught in Scripture? Rome points to several passages, but none of them really teach a purgatory. (Cf. Isaiah 4:4; Micah 7:8; Zechariah 9:11; Malachi 3:2, 3; Matthew 5:22, 25, 26, 12:32; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Revelation 21:27.) Of course, Roman Catholics try to prove it from 2 Maccabees 12:43-45, in the Apocrypha. But even this does not speak of purgatory as they present it. That book, not a Scriptural one, is highly questionable as to its content.

It is true that Christians are not perfect in this life. We do not attain to perfect holiness here. There is, indeed, a purging but it takes place in this life (cf. Isaiah 6:7; Psalm 51:7; Malachi 3:3; John 15:2). Compare these verses in the King James and American Standard Versions of the Bible and you will see that purging takes place here and you will see how it takes place. Thankfully, "*a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.*" (Galatians 2:16).

It is not hard to see the error of the Romish doctrine of purgatory. Calvin puts it this way:

But if ... the blood of Christ is the sole satisfaction for the sins of believers, the sole expiation, the sole purgation, what remains but to say that purgatory is simply a dreadful blasphemy against Christ.

(*Institutes*, III, v. 6)

It does away with the all-sufficient atoning work of Christ on Calvary because purgatory is a time of penal suffering. True, Rome indicates that the suffering of purgatory has no meaning nor power without Christ's suffering, but it is still *an addition* to Christ's work on Calvary. Thus it makes Christ's suffering only a partially powerful work.

Now, degrees of rewards and punishments

As soon as this subject is raised there are those who respond: "Heaven is Heaven; Hell is Hell. There are no elite in either Heaven or Hell." And it is for exactly this reason that we must see what the Scriptures say.

Of course, it is true that all who go to Heaven will be there because they are saved by grace, and because of that no one there will have any reason to boast. Also, all who go to Hell will be there under the just condemnation of God.

However, the Bible does teach that there will be degrees of rewards and punishments.

For some in Hell, we are told that it will be "*more tolerable*" than for others (Matthew 11:22, 24). Some are said to "*receive greater condemnation*" (Luke 20:47). Also, Jesus spoke of judgment in terms of being beaten with many or few stripes (Luke 12:47, 48). The intensity of punishment depends, then, according to the light which they had. Hendriksen writes:

The fact that the degree of light which a person has received will make a difference in the teaching of Scripture throughout. This does not mean that those who sinned in a state of relative ignorance are completely without guilt. But it does mean that a just God does not leave out of account the privileges and opportunities which a person has enjoyed, or the lack of these advantages.

(The Bible on the Life Hereafter, 96)

Then he calls attention to Acts 3:17 and 1 Timothy 1:13.

A similar emphasis is found in Scripture concerning degrees of rewards in glory. In the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) we learn that we are to be faithful to God's cause and kingdom. That is our calling while we wait for the Lord's return. In this parable we are told that we will be rewarded in proportion to our faithfulness (vv 16-19). Now, obviously, this reward is not earned. It is all of grace, as is even our faithfulness. Commenting on this parable, Hendriksen writes in his *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* (861):

The nobleman, now king, praises both servants and assigns control over cities to both, to each in exact proportion to the profit made. Similarly, the Lord Jesus Christ, at his glorious return will praise his faithful servants and will reward them in proportion to the degree of faithfulness they have shown. They will be given an opportunity to render even greater service in the new heaven and earth.

This same truth might also be found in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

In 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 we are reminded that even though we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ, not all will receive the same reward. See also 1 Corinthians 3:8.

This does not mean, however, that those experiencing these rewards or punishments after death will be conscious of the degrees. Each one will experience to *his fullest capacity* what the Lord has for him. There will be no room for comparison, or in Heaven there would be imperfection. There will be no jealousy or anger for no one can experience any more or less than what he does. There will be complete joy, for instance, on the part of each one enjoying the Lord's gracious reward. Someone has illustrated it this way: Take a pint jar, a quart jar and a gallon jar. Pour each one full to the top so that it is full to capacity. No more can be put in; none is lacking in fulness. Yet, each one is different; and the difference is because of the jars' capacity. So it will be in the experience of rewards and punishments.

What, then, ought we to remember? "He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully."

(2 Corinthians 9:6)

Jerome M Julien

© 2015
www.christianstudylibrary.org