

# Purgatory for Everyone

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A few years ago, the journalist Philip Nobile wrote an article near the first anniversary of the death of Princess Diana in which he raised what he termed “an indiscreet theological question.” “Where is she now?” he asked. According to Christian theology, the options were heaven, purgatory, or hell. Given Diana’s well-publicized lifestyle, Nobile suggested that the case for heaven was weak. A better case could be made for hell, given the likelihood that Diana was in a state of mortal sin at the moment of her death. Nobile thus found it curious that the Pope gave positive indications about Diana’s salvation when the following message of condolence was sent on his behalf to Queen Elizabeth: “The Holy Father has offered prayers summoning her to our Heavenly Father’s eternal love.” As Nobile observed, this remark implied Diana was in purgatory.

Now Nobile certainly did not intend his article to serve as a defense of orthodoxy. Yet it raises a substantive issue that Christians who take the afterlife seriously cannot evade. Many believers have attended funerals in which the deceased are declared to be enjoying all the glories of heaven, regardless of their somewhat less-than-saintly behavior in life. At best, such occasions are examples of understandable pastoral efforts to comfort grieving loved ones. But at worst, they may be sentimental exercises that trivialize the most central beliefs of the Christian faith.

What I have in mind are the many beliefs shared by Roman Catholics and evangelicals concerning, in particular, the nature of salvation. This growing consensus was expressed most notably in “The Gift of Salvation,” a document signed by a number of leading Roman Catholic and evangelical spokesmen, which reiterates the classical view that there is a close relationship between justification and sanctification. Salvation, in this view, is far more than forgiveness of our sins; it is also a matter of thorough moral and spiritual transformation. The document stresses this point by denying that faith is mere intellectual assent and asserting that it is “an act of the whole person, involving the mind, the will, and the affections, issuing in a changed life.” It then goes on to insist that Christians are bound by their faith and baptism “to live according to the law of love in obedience to Jesus Christ the Lord. Scripture calls this the life of holiness or sanctification.”

It is here that “an indiscreet theological question” must be faced. If salvation essentially involves transformation—and, at that same time, we cannot be united with God unless we are holy—what becomes of those who plead the atonement of Christ for salvation but die before they have been thoroughly transformed? These people will have accepted the truth about God and themselves through repentance and faith, but their character will not have been made perfect. Their sanctification has begun but it remains incomplete. Such people do not seem to be ready for a heaven of perfect love and fellowship with God, but neither should they be consigned to hell.

It is this basic difficulty that led to the formulation of the doctrine of purgatory in the first place. While the doctrine was not fully developed until the Middle Ages, the seeds from which it grew go back at least to the Church Fathers, if not to Scripture itself. Cyprian (c. 200–258), for instance, struggled with the question of what to think about Christians who had weakened under persecution. Likewise, Augustine (354–430), the fountainhead of Western theology, reflected in several passages on the kinds of issues that would

eventually be resolved in Roman Catholic theology by the doctrine of purgatory. (Of course, the doctrine also has roots in the popular conviction that the living might in some fashion influence the dead, particularly by prayer.)

While the doctrine is most fully developed in Roman Catholic theology, a version of it is also affirmed by some Eastern Orthodox theologians. The main difference between them is that Roman Catholics have traditionally viewed purgatory as a place of temporal punishment for individuals who have not sufficiently repented before death, whereas Eastern theologians view it as a process of growth and maturation for persons who have not completed the sanctification process.

Despite widespread acceptance of the doctrine of purgatory in some form, Protestants, by and large, have traditionally rejected the notion out of hand. The roots of this rejection go back, of course, to the Reformation, and it is well known that purgatory was deeply connected with the most basic and bitter disputes that split the Western Church. Among these disputes is the Protestant notion of *sola scriptura*, the view that Scripture alone is the source and authority for doctrine. Many Protestants would summarily dispense with purgatory on the ground that it is not mentioned in Scripture, at least not obviously so, a point that is generally conceded even by the defenders of the doctrine.

The fact that purgatory is not expressly present in Scripture is not enough to settle the issue, however. The deeper issue is whether it is a reasonable inference from important truths that are clearly found there. If theology involves a degree of disciplined speculation and logical inference, then the doctrine of purgatory cannot simply be dismissed on the grounds that Scripture does not explicitly articulate it.

Moreover, the prevailing doctrine of purgatory at the time of the Reformation was related to some of the worst abuses in the Church, particularly the sale of indulgences, a practice that many saw as a denial that we are saved through faith in Christ. It is no wonder, in light of this history, that the doctrine has provoked such strong reactions among Protestants. The larger issues and passions involved in this controversy are reflected in the words of Calvin, who wrote that “we must cry out with the shouting not only of our voices but our throats and lungs that purgatory is a deadly fiction of Satan, which nullifies the cross of Christ, inflicts unbearable contempt upon God’s mercy, and overturns and destroys our faith.” The attitude had not changed much in Reformed theology by the nineteenth century when Charles Hodge, the great Princeton theologian, wrote his classic systematic theology. Hodge noted that Roman Catholics tended to vary their account of purgatory depending on the audience. Protestants were presented with a mild form of the doctrine, while Catholics depicted it for themselves in severe terms. Hodge thus saw purgatory as “a tremendous engine of priestly power. The feet of the tiger withdrawn are as soft as velvet; when those claws are extended, they are fearful instruments of laceration and death.”

In the past few decades, by contrast, purgatory has lost much of its controversial edge. This is no doubt largely due to the decline of interest in the doctrine among Catholics, even among those who continue officially to affirm it. And while Protestants still generally repudiate the notion, the matter incites much less fervor than it did in previous generations.

In my view, it is long past time to reassess purgatory and the theological problems it was originally intended to solve. I write as a member of the Wesleyan tradition, a strand of Protestantism that emphasizes sanctification and moral transformation in its account of salvation. In agreement with the Great Tradition of Christian teaching, Wesleyans reject the notion that salvation is only, or even primarily, a forensic matter of having the righteousness of Christ imputed or attributed to believers. Wesleyans insist that God not only forgives us but also changes us and actually makes us righteous. Only when we are entirely sanctified or fully perfected in this sense are we truly fit to enjoy the beatific vision in heaven.

But what of Protestants who emphasize the forensic aspect of salvation? How have they resolved the problem of sin and moral imperfection that remains in the lives of believers at the time of death? They agree, after all, that nothing impure or unholy can enter heaven and they also typically hold that most, if not

all, believers are far from perfection when they die. The typical answer echoes the view eloquently expressed by Jonathan Edwards.

At death the believer not only gains a perfect and eternal deliverance from sin and temptation, but is adorned with a perfect and glorious holiness. The work of sanctification is then completed, and the beautiful image of God has then its finishing strokes by the pencil of God, and begins to shine forth with a heavenly beauty like a seraphim.

In other words, the work that believers in the broader Catholic tradition ascribe to purgatory is, for most Protestants, accomplished immediately, and apparently painlessly, by a unilateral act of God at death.

An important variation on this theme appears in the theology of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Unlike most Protestant theologians, Wesley believed that complete sanctification is possible in this life. In his model of the order of salvation, such sanctification can be received in a moment of faith analogous to the way justification is accepted by faith. Wesley also stressed the progressive dimension of sanctification and thought that entire sanctification could not normally be received without years of gradual growth and progress in grace and holiness. But what is significant for our purposes is that Wesley believed that, in most cases, complete sanctification takes place at “the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body.”

Interestingly enough, current Catholic thought seems to be converging with Protestantism on this matter. Many contemporary Catholic theologians argue that purification occurs in the act and experience of dying. This view can also be detected in the attitudes of the many lay Catholics who affirm the existence of purgatory but think it need be endured for but a momentary period—well in time for the funeral eulogy! A consensus thus seems to be forming that our sanctification is completed either during the experience of death or immediately thereafter.

I want to argue, however, that the traditional doctrine of purgatory is far more coherent for Protestants and Catholics alike. The most basic problem for those who hold that sanctification is instantly completed at the moment of death, as Anglican theologian David Brown has pointed out, is that “there is no way of rendering such an abrupt transition in essentially temporal beings conceivable.” One way to avoid this problem is to appeal to the highly controversial doctrine of God’s timelessness and to maintain that after death we share in this condition, thereby rendering temporal considerations irrelevant. The matter of God’s relationship to time is one of the most vexing problems in the philosophy of religion, and it would take us far afield to discuss it. I will simply register the fact that I have doubts about the coherence of the doctrine of timelessness, so I do not think this move solves the problem.

More plausible is the attempt to conceive of sanctification along the lines of abrupt and dramatic conversions in this life. But as Brown also points out, there is good reason to think that such dramatic turnarounds have important antecedent causes that lead up to and prepare their way. Moreover, while outward change of behavior may occur rather dramatically, internal change of character is another matter. Real virtue is achieved over a period of time by numerous choices and decisions, often in the face of adversity. Brown concludes that if man is essentially temporal, “his capacity for moral perfection is likewise. No clear sense attaches to the claim that a human being could become instantaneously virtuous, morally perfect, and so, if God is to respect our nature as essentially temporal beings, He must have allowed for an intermediate state of purgatory to exist.”

It is just this sort of consideration that led Wesley to insist that sanctification must normally be preceded by a significant period of growth and maturation. Without this process, one is not prepared to receive the fullness of grace sanctification represents. If this basic line of thought is correct, there is good reason to think that something like the traditional notion of purgatory is indeed necessary for those who have not experienced significant growth and moral progress.

The classical notion of purgatory also seems necessary to a related issue in the process of sanctification: our free participation in it. Many Christian theologians have held that our necessary cooperation in our transformation constitutes the only satisfactory explanation for the bewildering array of good and evil in the world. God takes our freedom seriously and is patient with it; He recognizes that even those who have made an initial decision to follow His will often make only sporadic or inconsistent progress in carrying out their resolution. In this view, while it is God who enables and elicits our transformation each step of the way, our cooperation with His will is necessary to our sanctification.

Now if God deals with us this way in this life, it is reasonable to think He will continue to do so in the next life until our perfection is achieved. Indeed, the point should be put more strongly than this. If God is willing to dispense with our free cooperation in the next life, it is hard to see why He would not do so now, particularly in view of the high price of freedom in terms of evil and suffering.

In the same vein, Anglican philosopher of religion Eleonore Stump has explicated the sanctification process by employing her fellow philosopher Harry Frankfurt's notion of a self as hierarchically ordered desires. Of particular interest is the distinction between first- and second-order desires. First-order desires are basic desires such as, for example, Abelard's desire to seduce Heloise. Second-order desires are desires about first-order desires. So, recognizing the spiritual and moral liabilities in seducing Heloise, not to mention the possibility of inciting her uncle's wrath, Abelard may wish he did not have such desires for Heloise. That is, he may have a second-order desire that his first-order desires were different.

Now Stump suggests that sanctification occurs with our freedom intact if God changes us at the level of our first-order desires in response to our second-order desires that He do so. Of course, God's grace also enables us to have the appropriate second-order desires. Stump's picture, however, raises another question about the nature of the divine-human cooperation in sanctification. Why wouldn't a person's sanctification be complete the instant he formed the second-order desire to be sanctified? The answer, Stump replies, is that

the content of this volition is vague. It consists in a general submission to God and an effective desire to let God remake one's character. But a willingness of this sort is psychologically compatible with stubbornly holding on to any number of sins. . . . Making a sinner righteous, then, will be a process in which a believer's specific volitions are brought into harmony with the governing second-order volition assenting to God's bringing her to righteousness, with the consequent gradual alteration in first-order volitions, as well as in intellect and emotions.

Stump goes on to comment that this is a "process extending through this life and culminating in the next." Although this is not an explicit defense of purgatory, such a doctrine seems to be the natural extension of her line of thought.

The reason that the desire for sanctity may be psychologically compatible with holding on to any number of sins is that one may not clearly recognize them as sins or perceive their destructiveness to the point of truly wishing to be delivered from them. The process of sanctification involves coming to see the truth about not only our overt sinful actions, but also about the more subtle sinful attitudes we may cherish. A broad desire to be sanctified simply may not recognize all that is involved; that's why it takes time and growth for grace to penetrate the deeper recesses of our sinful characters.

Of course, the process must culminate at some point, and there is no reason why it may not reach its end in an act of faith in this life, just as Wesley believed it could. But the significant point is that considerable growth is required before such a stage can be reached. And if this growth has not occurred in this life, purgatory seems necessary if God is to complete the job with our freedom intact.

These accounts of purgatory underscore the notion that no one can be exempted from the requirement of achieving perfect sanctity in cooperation with God's grace and initiative. It is also important to reiterate here that, as beings who exist in time, our transformation must be a cooperative venture. It takes time to

gain understanding of the various layers of our sinfulness and self-deception, as well as to own the truth about ourselves. Discerning truth and allowing it to transform our character is an essentially mental experience that requires time. The doctrine of purgatory makes clear that there is no shortcut to sanctity.

The doctrine of purgatory also reminds us that the most pervasive and deadly sins are those of the spirit. Spiritual sins are not cured merely by dropping our old bodies and receiving new ones. Consider in this light the words of Edwards: “The saved soul leaves all its sin with the body; when it puts off the body of the man, it puts off the body of sin with it. When the body is buried, all sin is buried forever, and though the soul shall be joined to the body again, yet sin shall never return more.” Implicit in this argument is a sort of gnosticism that locates sin in our physical bodies. It is as if sanctification were largely effected by releasing the soul from the body. Again, this makes sanctification a passive matter that requires no cooperation on our part.

It is at this point of our cooperation that Protestant objections to purgatory become most pointed, even in our ecumenical age. To take our role in sanctification so seriously that purgatory seems to be required inevitably provokes loud protests concerning works righteousness. Contemporary theologian Millard Erickson speaks for many of his fellow evangelicals when he writes, “In both this life and the life to come, the basis of the believer’s relationship with God is grace, not works. There need be no fear, then, that our imperfections will require some type of post-death purging before we can enter the full presence of God.”

Some Protestants go so far as to insist that purgatory amounts to a denial of justification by faith. I would insist, however, that it all depends on what one means by *justification* and by *faith*. As Alister McGrath has shown, the traditional view was that justification involves actually making us righteous, and that this is what finally restores us to a loving relationship with God. It was a Protestant innovation to separate justification from sanctification and to construe the former primarily in legal and forensic terms. But since justification so understood does not make us actually righteous, it is simply irrelevant as an objection to purgatory.

Erickson’s objection misses the mark for similar reasons. To insist that we must be fully transformed by freely cooperating with God before we can fully enter His presence is not a denial of the fact that grace is the basis of our relationship with Him. For His grace is precisely what takes the initiative and enables our transformation. Erickson’s objection to purgatory implies that grace is primarily, if not exclusively, a matter of forgiveness. It is this narrowly forensic conception of grace that must be challenged.

Appealing to God’s forgiveness does nothing to address the fact that many Christians are imperfect lovers of God (and others) at the time of their death. This is not to say that the experience of being forgiven does not change us. Indeed, gratitude for God’s free offer of forgiveness is a powerful incentive for the believer to love God in return. But forgiveness alone, especially on a legal model, does not change us in a subjective sense. Consider in this light the words of C. S. Lewis, an author whose views are usually endorsed enthusiastically by evangelical Protestants.

Our souls *demand* purgatory, don’t they? Would it not break the heart if God said to us, “It is true, my son, that your breath smells and your rags drip with mud and slime, but we are charitable here and no one will upbraid you with these things, nor draw away from you. Enter into the joy”? Should we not reply, “With submission, sir, and if there is no objection, I’d rather be cleansed first”? “It may hurt, you know.”—“Even so, sir.”

Forgiveness alone does not eliminate unpleasant odors, and lack of condemnation does not clean up soiled clothes. Other remedies are necessary, and as Lewis suggests, they may involve pain.

The invocation of pain has also been a major source of resistance to the doctrine of purgatory. At its best, this is an understandable reaction to the rather lurid depictions of purgatory that have appeared in some Roman Catholic writers in the past. At worst, however, it smacks of the sort of cheap grace, pervasive in much popular contemporary piety, which implies that mere mental assent to some basic Christian doctrines

is all that is necessary for salvation. On this picture, salvation is a perfectly painless thing that requires nothing of the believer but simple faith.

Lewis insists, by contrast, that the moral transformation necessary for salvation is essentially painful. The pain of moral growth and progress is not an arbitrary punishment that God attaches to it; rather, the pain is intrinsic to it. Lewis makes this point vividly in several memorable images in *The Great Divorce*. For instance, the fact that the grass in heaven hurts the feet of the ghosts from the gray town (purgatory for those who choose to leave it, hell for those who stay) shows that becoming conformed to the life of heaven is uncomfortable for sinful persons. “Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows.” The promise is given, however, that those who are willing to persevere will eventually become more substantial, and thus more comfortable, in heaven.

Purgatory enables us fully to come to terms with reality. Richard Purtill has suggested that the period between our death and resurrection will be a time of “reading” our lives like a book. The entire book would be present to us and we could reread past sections, skip ahead, and so on. All of this reading would be done in what he calls “Godlight.” That is, it would be a matter of coming to see our lives as God sees them. This would involve, for instance, seeing the full force of how our sins affected others. “The only adequate purgatory might be to suffer what you made others suffer—not just an equivalent pain, but that pain, seeing yourself as the tormentor you were to them. Only then could you adequately reject and repent the evil.” The other side of the coin is that we “would see with love even those who have hurt us, because God saw them with love.”

Indeed, the accent here should fall on grace, for to see things in “Godlight” is to see them illumined by God’s perfect love for all persons and His will to redeem us from our sins and unite us to Himself and to each other. Continuing the reading analogy, Purtill points out that, although the first time we read a book we may hardly appreciate it, a subsequent reading may fully disclose its beauty and richness.

As we may write a commentary on a book that has meant much to us, so part of our afterlife could be an appreciation and correction of our present lives. Even if our present lives have been almost a failure—even if we are barely saved after a life of folly and waste—we could still make these wasted lives the foundation of something glorious—a “commentary” much better than the “book.”

Purgatory so conceived is not only a matter of taking our choices and our freedom seriously, it is more importantly a matter of taking seriously God’s overwhelmingly gracious love to us and His power to redeem our lives, even “wasted” ones.

Construed along these lines, purgatory can rightly be characterized as a time and place of joy. While popular images of purgatory may evoke negative thoughts, we should recall that the New Testament frequently teaches Christians to rejoice in the adversity that purifies our faith. This is not to trivialize the pain of purgatory, but rather to point out that it should not be dreaded any more than the pain of moral transformation that we experience in this life.

Indeed, all believers, regardless of tradition, who have experienced as joy the purging involved in drawing closer to Christ can view the concept of purgatory not only as a natural doctrinal development, but also as a gracious gift of love.

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