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PURGATORY - 1

By D. B. Knox

"The Protestant Faith"

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One of the most important questions that can be asked is the question of 'where do we go when we die?' What is the Christian hope for life beyond death? This is an important question, which touches us all very closely; but from the nature of the case, we cannot answer it from our own experience; it can only be answered from God's Word, for God alone is able to reveal the truth as to what lies beyond the curtain of death. Now the Bible is God's Word.

So turning to the Bible we are impressed by our Lord's words to the penitent thief, who was being crucified on a cross alongside His. In Luke 23:42 we read "And Jesus said unto him, truly I say unto thee today thou shalt be with me in paradise." We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that paradise is another name for heaven. This assurance of Jesus to His companion is all the more remarkable because the dying thief was converted only in the last moments of his life. He had no good works and he was without any of the benefits of Church rites, but on the confession of his sinful way of life, and on his expressed faith in Jesus as Lord, he received the promise that he would be with Christ in paradise on the very day of his death. He went from the cross to the crown.

Our Lord taught this same truth that the Christian goes straight to Heaven at death, in his story of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16. At death, Lazarus goes without delay to rest and bliss and joy, while the sinner goes to hell, the torments, to quote Jesus' word.

Turning to the teaching of St. Paul we find that the Apostle expresses the same truth clearly. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 5 "We know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle is dissolved we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ... knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord (for we walk by faith, not by sight); we are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." In these verses St. Paul teaches the

Corinthians that when we leave our bodies we are ushered into the presence of our Saviour, Who is seated at God's right hand in heaven.

In his letter to the Philippians the Apostle Paul repeats the same sentiments, saying "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ... I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better". Notice how the Apostle teaches his readers to be confident that death ushers them into the presence of Christ, who is in heaven.

Thus as we think of the passing of our Christian friends, or, indeed, as we face that valley ourselves, our hearts should not tremble nor be afraid, nor shrink, but we should have peace and joy through remembering that our Saviour Christ will receive us. In Revelation 14:13 we read "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this down, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them."

The question may arise in our minds as to how it is possible that we who are so marred by sin and imperfection should enter immediately into heaven, that place of perfections. The answer is simple: we enter into God's presence not by our own right, but by Christ's; not clothed with our own virtues, but with Christ's. St. Paul's hope, so he told the Philippians, was "to be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of my own, namely that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, a righteousness which is from God by faith."

The teaching of the New Testament is plain that those who are trusting in Christ go to be with Him at death. The Roman Catholics believe not only in heaven and hell, which are taught in the Bible, but also in a third place, purgatory. Hell is for impenitent sinners, but purgatory is for Christians on their way to heaven. Purgatory is described as a place of

punishment where Christian souls suffer "a most severe punishment", to quote the words of a book by a former Roman Catholic Coadjutor Archbishop of Sydney.

The Archbishop goes on to describe these souls in purgatory as enduring dreadful suffering and agony. I quote from page 293 of 'Catholic Doctrine' by Archbishop Sheean as taught in the Roman Catholic day schools, "Such a purgatory is a place of terror and torment; the pains of which differ little from those of hell, except that they don't last for ever, but that there is a hope of being released from them".

For Roman Catholics who believe this teaching about purgatory, death is a terrifying prospect, for it ushers us into a place of terror and torment, the pains of which we are told differ little from those of Hell, in which we are likely to stay for a long long period.

Happily, it may be stated that there is no mention in Scripture of purgatory. It is an entirely imaginary place. It has no existence in fact, although a great deal of Roman Catholic practice is based on a belief in its reality. However, not only is Scripture silent about it but the possibility of its existence is excluded by the plain teaching of those Scriptures which I have already quoted, which teach that at death the Christian goes to be with Christ.

A belief in purgatory arises from a lack of knowledge of the Bible. It is not surprising that as a result of the new interest in the Bible in the Roman Catholic church the doctrine of purgatory is being corrected. Thus on page 477 of "A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults" published by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Holland, purgatory is explained away and Roman Catholics are told "we must train our imagination to return to the soberness of antiquity and to consider the purification of purgatory as connected with death, we must not seek it as of the last things in isolation. We must not make it too independent an entity - all the more so because Scripture hardly speaks of it at all."

The only Scripture quoted is 2 Maccabees - which of course is not in the Bible, but in the Apocrypha, so that Scripture is quite silent about purgatory.

A belief in a place of painful purging after death arises from a forgetfulness of the power of God's Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit Who transforms us into Christ's likeness, and for this no long process of purging with painful fire is necessary. Here and now, as our hearts gaze on Christ, made known to us in Scripture, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit's power into Christ's likeness, from glory to glory, as St. Paul puts it. When at death we shall see Christ face to face and no longer in a glass, darkly, then we shall be like Him, transformed by the same power of the Holy Spirit.

This is also true at Christ's second coming. Even Roman Catholics acknowledge that when our Lord comes again there will be no need for purgatory; nor any place for it; for the Bible says that we who are alive shall then all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Thus, whether at His second coming or at our entering into His presence at death, it is the power of God which transforms us into Christ's likeness. A purgatory is not needed. Such is the teaching of God's Word.

There is a second basic error in the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. Not only is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit neglected, but also the forgiving work of Christ. This forgetfulness of Christ's satisfaction for all our sins is illustrated by Cardinal Bellarmine's remarks about purgatory (Book 2 Chapter 9). I quote "The torments there are so dreadful that to attempt to describe them would be utterly in vain. ...In purgatory are kept those who in this life had repented indeed of their sins but had not paid the penalty due for them."

To this we may reply that if we repent indeed of our sins, they are completely forgiven us. They are blotted out like a thick cloud, as the Bible says. We do not have to pay the penalty for them for Christ has paid it all in His death on the cross, as I said, since the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

There is no need for purgatory because there is no condemnation to those who are trusting in Christ Jesus. We do not need the purging of purgatory to make us worthy of heaven for "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin". His death is the only purgatory or place of cleansing that we need, and those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb are cleansed from every spot. So you see that there is no room for a doctrine of purgatory in New Testament religion. No wonder, then, there is no teaching about it in Scripture to which alone we must go in answering the question of what lies beyond death.

On the contrary the Bible teaches us that if we have put our faith in Christ, if we acknowledge Him as Lord, we may look forward not only to His blessing now, in this life, but to bliss hereafter. Not terror and torment in purgatory, but rest and joy and happiness in the presence of God in Heaven is what the Bible assures Christians will be their portion after death. This is what God has prepared for those who love Him. This sure and certain hope should fill our thoughts, so that we serve God now with cheerfulness and joy, and rest in Him for the future.

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