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CLIMBING FOR MERIT

by

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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It is very pleasant to be back in Sydney again after twelve months overseas. The Australian climate is a wonderful asset in itself, and to experience the genial atmosphere and friendliness of everyone is most refreshing.

While we were in England I took my family onto the Continent and we went as far South as Rome. It was most interesting, as you can imagine, and exciting for the children. I am not surprised at Martin Luther's enthusiasm for the city of Rome when he visited it in 1510. It is certainly a most striking city with its continuous history over so many centuries. It was a wonderful experience to walk in the street where St Paul walked, and to see the lofty column that Trajan the Roman General had put up to commemorate his victories. The column has carved on its side the story of his campaigns. It was Trajan who captured Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and destroyed it completely, so fulfilling Jesus' prediction that there would not be one stone of the temple left on another. Everything was thrown down. Interestingly enough, Trajan's statue which he put on top of his column has had substituted for it at some time in the past a statue of St Peter. So we have a nice touch here, showing how mediaeval Rome took over Ancient Rome.

Not far away was a very sad sight. It was a building just outside the old papal palace of the

Lateran and inside the building there was a staircase of 28 marble stairs leading up to a small chapel which is the only surviving portion of the former Palace of the Popes. The Chapel is called the Holy of Holies and within it there is said to be a portrait of Jesus - a miraculous one - painted, so we were told, without human hand. On this staircase was a very sad sight. People were climbing up on their knees, saying prayers, in the hope and belief that they would get to heaven the sooner by doing this. At the bottom of these stairs was a placard to the effect that by going up these stairs on your knees you would be able to obtain remission of punishment due for your sins in Purgatory. An earlier Pope had declared that for every stair so ascended God would give nine years of remission of Purgatory. But a subsequent Pope made this even more generous. A plenary indulgence for punishment of all sins in Purgatory was granted to those who ascended the staircase on their knees. The placard said that the stairs came from Pontius Pilate's Palace in Jerusalem so that they would be the ones that Jesus Himself ascended to go to His trial and descended to go to the crucifixion. This is highly improbable because not only was Jerusalem destroyed in A.D. 70 but the physical problem of transporting these stairs from Jerusalem to Rome in the fourth century as it was claimed would be a tremendous undertaking. But the authenticity of the staircase was not the real question.

After all there are many sites which we know to be authentic where Jesus lived and walked such as the ruins of the Synagogue at Capernaum by the Lake of Galilee. What was so sad was not the belief in the story of the transportation of these stairs but the use to which the stairs were being put. Men and women, young and old, climbing up them on their knees in the belief that by doing so God would forgive them the punishment due to their sins. What a strange concept of God they must have, and how slender a grip of the Gospel that the Lord Jesus Christ by His life and by His death had borne all our punishment so that we are able to stand in God's presence forgiven, completely forgiven, as children in the presence of their father. Every sin which we have done is blotted out for Christ's sake, if we put our faith in Him. We do not have to win back God's graciousness by strange and laborious actions, for He loves us. He Himself has provided free and full forgiveness for our sins. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have everlasting life". If God gives us everlasting life in Jesus Christ and gives it to us now, there is no need to earn the forgiveness of the punishment due to our sins by the sort of action these people, knowing no better, were engaged in.

Roman Catholics have been taught to believe that if at death they

escape going to Hell, which is eternal and hopeless, they are likely to be required to spend a time in Purgatory before entering Heaven. The pains of Purgatory are said to be as intense and awful as those of Hell itself. Naturally, therefore, if you believe this, you will use such opportunities as you have of shortening your time in Purgatory. Now the Popes have said that by climbing these stairs upon your knees you shorten your time in Purgatory, and that is the reason why these people are engaged in this otherwise meaningless activity.

Not every Roman Catholic these days believes in this sort of Purgatory. The Council of Trent simply stated that there was a Purgatory and modern Roman Catholics interpret this in such a way as to eliminate the concept altogether, because after all Purgatory is not taught in the Bible. The Bible teaches plainly that at death we go into the presence of Christ. St Paul said: "Absent from the body present with the Lord" and Jesus said to the thief who repented on the cross "To-day you shall be with me in paradise". If at death the believer goes into Christ's presence, as the Bible teaches, then there is no scope for Purgatory.

Some leading Roman Catholics have abandoned the traditional belief in Purgatory. For example, the Roman Catholic bishops of Holland have authorised "A New Catechism" with the

sub-title "Catholic Faith for Adults", a book that runs to 500 pages. Less than one page is given to Purgatory and in that page Purgatory as an experience after death is denied. Purgatory, insofar as the concept is retained at all, is simply identified with death. We read on page 476 that Purgatory "takes place in death. To die is also to die to evil. It is a baptism of death along with Christ in which the baptism of water is completed... We must not make it (Purgatory) too independent an entity; all the more so because Scripture hardly speaks of it at all". The Catechism then quotes from 2 Maccabees and this is the only passage of Scripture cited. But of course this passage does not mention Purgatory and nor is it in the Bible, but in the Apocrypha. This catechism reinterprets and really contradicts the concept of Purgatory by identifying it with death and the entering into Christ's presence, so it is not surprising that the Catechism also plays down indulgences, because indulgences - a very widespread practice in the Church of Rome - is a way by which the torments of Purgatory can be shortened by doing certain actions which the Popes have prescribed, such, for example, as climbing up on your knees the sacred stairs outside the old Papal Palace. The Catechism has hardly more than a sentence or two about indulgences which it describes as "These antiquated customs" (p. 455). Whether antiquated or not the urge to obtain

indulgences is based on fear. Certainly for those climbing the stairs on their knees in Rome at the present day there must be a tremendous fear; fear of the pains of Purgatory, fear of God's judgment after death, fear of the judgment of the God in whom they should be trusting. There seems very little room for the love of God to be present in the heart at the same time as this sort of fear, because as St John tells us in his letters "Perfect love banishes fear". Our hearts should be filled with love and thanksgiving to God, and a determination to do His will; not fear which forgets His promise and drives us on to earn merit after merit after merit.

As I saw the penitents climbing the stairs on their knees I thought of Martin Luther who, when he visited Rome in 1510 before the Reformation Movement had begun, had begun to climb those stairs on his knees in the hope of shortening his time in Purgatory. But half-way up the stairs a verse from the Bible rang through his mind "The just shall live by faith". It was a verse that Habakkuk the Prophet had first uttered and which St Paul had re-echoed in his letter to the church at Rome, "The just shall live by faith". But here was Luther trying to live by works, anxious to accumulate merit with God by climbing up on his knees as he said his prayers, as though God were going to add this particular activity to his credit. But the Bible says "The just shall live by faith".

This was God's word. Luther wanted eternal life, he was trying to earn it by merit; but God had said "The just shall live by faith". We are told that Luther got up from his knees straight away, walked down and walked out. He turned his back on salvation by merit. For him from now on it was to be salvation by trust in God.

Who was right? Luther walking down, or those penitents still walking up on their knees? What did the prophet mean when he said "The just shall live by faith"? What does St Paul mean when he re-echoed this truth? To be just, means to be accepted by God; that is what we all want, to be accepted by God. Those climbing the sacred stairs on their knees hope to be accepted by God as the result of what they are doing and there are many in other denominations who hope to be accepted by God for their merits. But the prophet said "The just shall live by faith". It is by faith that we are accepted by God into His fellowship and are just in His sight and live in His presence. "The just shall live by faith": faith in what? Faith in God's promises. God has spoken: some people hear and obey, others ignore His Word going their own way. Those who hear have faith in Him, and God accepts them and He gives them what He has promised. He promises to accept all who come to Him through Christ; to save them; to forgive them. His Word is clear, if any man sin the blood of Jesus Christ

His Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Since God promises that Christ's blood cleanses from all unrighteousness, we ought not to try and climb into His favour by our merit. It is up to us to believe Him, to trust Him, to thank Him, to serve Him, so that the peace of God may take the place of fear and guilt.

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