

What good are prayers for the dead? If a person is in heaven, he doesn't need prayers, and if he is damned, then no amount of prayers will help him.

Catholics and Protestants can agree on two things regarding the afterlife: Souls in hell will not grow close to God, and those in heaven cannot draw any nearer to him. If purgatory does not exist, prayers for the dead are useless. But if a state of purification exists for some after death, and if prayers can help others in their process of sanctification in *this* life (Job 1:5; 1 Thess. 5:23), it seems reasonable that prayers would be beneficial to those who are being sanctified after this life. This narrows down the essential question: Does purgatory exist?

If sin still clings to Christians (Heb 12:1), but there is no sin in heaven (Rev. 21:27), there must be a purification that takes place after one's death and before one enters heaven. Even if it were "in the blink of an eye," this final stage of sanctification must take place, so those who die in God's favor may be cleansed if any affection for sin remains in them.

Paul mentions this in 1 Cor. 3:13–15: "Each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

Paul's thought calls to mind the image of God as the refiner's fire and fuller's soap mentioned in Malachi 3:2. The fuller's soap was lye or alkaline salt that removed stains from clothing. A refiner's fire was an oven of intense heat where precious metals were placed in order to purify them of their corrosion and dross. In the same way, purgatory is when a soul is immersed into the fire of God's love and lifted out of the residue of its imperfections.

The only reason the Catholic Church invented this unbiblical idea of purgatory is to make money off the faithful who think that they can save their unrepentant deceased relatives by paying for Masses.

Does the Church amass wealth off of the doctrine of purgatory? The average Mass stipend (which is optional) is around five dollars. Say a parish had two daily Masses offered for the dead, it would amount to 70 dollars a week. Considering that the five-dollar stipend typically goes to pay for the church's electricity, maintenance, furnishings, salaries, Mass wine and bread, etc., it is apparent how silly this objection about "wealth" is.

Can Masses said after a person's death save his soul? No. Purgatory is only for those who have repented and have died in God's grace but still have some attachment to sin. While the Church cannot judge souls, we can be certain that if a person dies in a state of mortal sin without asking God's forgiveness, purgatory does not await him as if it were a second chance.

Weren't prayers for the dead an invention of the medieval Church?

Prayers for the dead are not only older than the Middle Ages, they pre-date Christianity. In the Old Testament, Judah Maccabee and his companions pray for the souls of departed soldiers: "It was a holy and pious thought. Therefore, he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (2 Macc. 12:45). While Protestants do not accept this as an inspired book, it is worthwhile to point out that even today Jews have a prayer called the kaddish that is offered for the purification of the deceased.

This practice of praying for the dead is also recorded throughout ancient Christian documents, such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla, and in the writings of Abercius, Perpetua, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, and Augustine. Since all of these men wrote between A.D. 160 and 421, prayers for the souls in purgatory can hardly be considered a medieval invention. On the contrary, refusing to pray for the dead is a novel idea in light of historic Judaism and Christianity.

The idea of souls needing prayers in purgatory seems so contrary to the gospel that no Bible-believing Christian could believe it.

Actually, since roughly 50 percent of all Christians are Catholics and 25 are Orthodox, about three-quarters of all Christians believe it. Certain Protestants, such as C.S. Lewis, have also held to the truth of the doctrine. In his *Letters to Malcom*, he said, "Of course I pray for the dead. The action is so spontaneous, so all but inevitable, that only the most compulsive theological case against it would deter me. And I hardly know how the rest of my prayers would survive if those for the dead were forbidden. At our age, the majority of those we love best are dead. What sort of intercourse with God could I have if what I love best were unmentionable to him?"

"I believe in Purgatory. . . . 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."

But purgatory implies that Christ's sacrifice was not sufficient, that he didn't finish the work of redemption on Calvary. Why do Catholics feel the need to add to it by doing more work in purgatory?

This objection is based on a pair of erroneous presumptions: That progressive sanctification and suffering take away from Christ's work on Calvary and that the Church teaches that purgatory is work.

To address the second objection first, purgatory is not a place for those bad Catholics who didn't finish working their way to heaven while on earth. "For by grace you have been saved by faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). The purification that takes place in purgatory is purely a work of God's grace, since there is no chance for merit after death, and the judgment of each individual is based solely upon their earthly life. But regardless of where Christ purifies men, it is precisely *because* his sacrifice was sufficient that each believer can be perfected.

Though Christ paid the infinite debt of man's sins 2,000 years ago, the sanctification process in the life of each Christian continues. In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Paul tells the faithful, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." According to Scripture, sanctification is a thing of the past (1 Cor. 6:11), present (1 Thess. 4:3), and future (1 Thess. 5:23) in the Christian life.

This process often involves suffering, as Paul indicates: "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross. . . . 'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:1–12).

Therefore, the presence of suffering does not detract from Christ's sacrifice. In fact, there is only one mention in all of Scripture of something "lacking in Christ's afflictions," and that missing link is the suffering of his mystical body, the Church (Col. 1:24).

I can accept that suffering happens to each believer, but Christ paid all punishments for sin. If purgatory is a punishment, then it means Christ left some part of the debt unpaid.

Some Christians maintain that all temporal punishments for sin are taken away if the person has repented. But the Bible indicates that although God takes away the eternal punishment, some temporal punishments may remain.

In the Old Testament, God forgave David, but still took the life of his son (2 Sam. 12:13–14). In the New Testament, Christ reiterates this principle, "Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny" (Matt. 5:25–26). It can also be mentioned that Christian women still experience the temporal punishment of birthpangs (Gen. 3:16), although Christ paid the infinite debt of man's original sin (Rom. 5:12–21).

The sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice is not lessened by the fact that God's work of perfecting his children is a process that often involves suffering and even temporal punishment. While "for the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant" (Heb 12:11), it is all a part of God's promise made through Paul, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6), even if it should be "as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:15).