

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

A

GRADE

Dennis R. McDonald, Ph.D.

THESIS MENTOR

Michael L. Chiavone, Ph.D.

READER

Liberty University School of Divinity

Absent from the Body, Present with the Lord: A Traditional Evangelical Critique of  
Traditional Roman Catholic and Non-Traditional Evangelical Teachings  
Regarding Purgatory

A Thesis Submitted to

the Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Theology

by

Thomas J. Gentry II

Carterville, Illinois

March 24, 2016

## ABSTRACT

### ABSENT FROM THE BODY, PRESENT WITH THE LORD: A TRADITIONAL EVANGELICAL CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL ROMAN CATHOLIC AND NON-TRADITIONAL EVANGELICAL TEACHINGS REGARDING PURGATORY

Thomas J. Gentry II

Liberty University School of Divinity, 2016

Mentor: Dr. Dennis McDonald

Traditional Roman Catholic theology and certain non-traditional expressions of evangelical theology teach that Christians who die without realizing perfect holiness will enter into a postmortem state called purgatory for the purpose of preparing them to behold the beatific vision of God in heaven. The purpose of this work is to refute these teachings by proving that they are unbiblical. The procedure for doing is to first summarize the traditional Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory; second, present interpretations of select biblical and apocryphal texts related to purgatory from the pro-purgatory perspective, followed by a traditional evangelical response; third, present a four-fold traditional evangelical critique of the traditional Roman Catholic teaching; fourth, present a summary of the non-traditional evangelical argument for purgatory as found in the work of Jerry Walls, followed by a two-fold traditional evangelical critique.

Abstract Length: 135

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr. Dennis McDonald and Dr. Michael Chiavone, my Thesis Mentor and Reader, respectively, for their expert input and guidance. I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from them during this process.

I also want to thank Dr. Gary Yates for his willingness to allow me to pursue studies as a residential student for the purpose of writing this thesis.

To all my Christian loved ones who have already closed their eyes in death and now  
know that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

What happens when Christians die? The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that ordinarily Christians enter into an intermediate state called purgatory, where they experience a time of purging for impurities that remain in their souls at the time of death. This purging occurs for varying lengths of time, based on the type of impurities, in order to prepare the Christian to eventually behold the beatific vision of God in heaven.<sup>1</sup> Roman Catholics are not, however, the only ones who espouse a doctrine of purgatory. There are also non-traditional evangelicals, who, for different reasons than traditional Roman Catholics, also conclude that upon death Christians are sent to purgatory before actually entering heaven.<sup>2</sup> These two views of purgatory are the subject of the thesis that follows. The problem the following research addresses is why the traditional Roman Catholic and non-traditional evangelical arguments for purgatory are wrong in light of the Bible's teaching.

#### **Statement of Purpose and Procedure**

The purpose of the research is to refute the traditional Roman Catholic and non-traditional evangelical teachings of purgatory by proving that they are unbiblical. The procedure for accomplishing this purpose is five-fold. First, the research summarizes the traditional Roman Catholic teaching regarding purgatory. Second, biblical and

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 291-299.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Walls and others are currently advancing this view. Walls's work is discussed in detail below.

apocryphal texts related to purgatory are presented from a pro-purgatory perspective, followed by a traditional evangelical response. Third, a traditional evangelical critique of the traditional Roman Catholic teaching presents four reasons to reject purgatory: first, it is contrary to Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 5:7-8 about what happens when a Christian dies; second, it is based on ambiguities and/or contradictions within the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; third, it diminishes the significance of the passive obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for justification; fourth, it diminishes the significance of the active obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for sanctification. The fourth step in the procedure summarizes the non-traditional evangelical position on purgatory and argues that this position is to be rejected, in addition to the first, third, fourth, and fifth discussed in relation to the Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory, for two reasons: first, it fails to explain how the thief on the cross (cf., Luke 23:32-43) was promised to be with Jesus in paradise upon his death; second, it creates a bifurcation between free will and the possibility of monergistic glorification. The fifth step in the process presents a synthesis of the arguments against the Roman Catholic and non-traditional evangelical positions on purgatory, and provides suggestions for additional scholarly inquiry related to the doctrine of purgatory. In light of this purpose and five-step procedure, the thesis is entitled, "Absent from the Body, Present with the Lord: A Traditional Evangelical Critique of Traditional Roman Catholic and Non-Traditional Evangelical Teachings Regarding Purgatory."

### **Statement of the Importance of the Problem**

This problem is significant for three reasons. First, since the time of the Protestant Reformation purgatory has been considered an affront to two key evangelical doctrines

related to authority and salvation.<sup>3</sup> Regarding authority, the Protestant Reformers argued that the Scriptures alone are the final authority for believers in all matters of faith and life (cf., 2 Tim 3:15-17). The doctrine of purgatory, the Reformers argued, is found nowhere in Scripture, but derives instead from church tradition, and is actually contrary to explicit biblical teachings regarding what happens when a believer dies (cf., 2 Cor 5:1-8). Regarding salvation, the Protestant Reformers argued that salvation is by grace through faith alone in Christ (cf., Eph 2:8-9). The Reformers concluded that the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory, in contradiction to the teaching of faith alone, meant that salvation was a process of works that continued into the intermediate state. Thus, the doctrine of purgatory made salvation a result of human effort.

The second reason this problem is significant is that, while different from the Roman Catholic approach to purgatory, there are non-traditional evangelicals who are now teaching that it is possible to affirm the doctrines of Scripture's ultimate authority and salvation by faith alone, and still embrace some variation of the doctrine of purgatory.<sup>4</sup> These non-traditional evangelicals, it will be argued, are introducing doctrines into the Protestant church that are inconsistent with historic evangelical teaching, and ultimately undermine the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of the atoning work of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> For a succinct presentation of the fundamental differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, especially as they relate to purgatory, see Gregg Allison, "What's the Difference?" *Credo* 3, vol. 1 (January 2013): 18-25.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory: Rethinking the Things that Matter Most* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015) and *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The third reason this problem is significant is that a growing number of Protestants are leaving their respective denominations and evangelical beliefs and becoming Roman Catholic.<sup>5</sup> This is related, in some instances, to a desire to embrace teachings, such as purgatory, that are in keeping with the long-standing tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. In some instances, those converting to Rome have not been challenged on the unbiblical basis of their new conclusions, nor have they seriously considered the historic evangelical teaching regarding what happens when a Christian dies.

This researcher is qualified to address this problem for two reasons. First, as a pastor he encounters those visiting his congregation for worship, and occasionally discovers those who are already part of the congregation who are unclear on the teachings of Scripture regarding what happens when a Christian dies. These people are sometimes considering the legitimacy of the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, even to the point of contemplating a move into the Roman Church. As a result of these congregational concerns, this researcher has spent considerable time and study involved with this issue, and concludes that he is able to build on that study as a foundation in further developing a biblical argument for rejecting any teaching on purgatory, be it Roman Catholic or non-traditional evangelical.

Second, this researcher is qualified to conduct this research because he was, at one time, drawn to Roman Catholic teaching and considered leaving Protestantism and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., Scott Hahn and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), Kindle. Scott is a former Presbyterian minister who now teaches biblical theology at Franciscan University, Steubenville, OH.

becoming Roman Catholic.<sup>6</sup> Thus, he understands, in part, the attraction others feel toward doctrines like purgatory, especially when they are couched in the language of popular apologists like C. S. Lewis, and concludes that his own experience in nearly becoming Roman Catholic provides a substantive personal experience with the doctrine of purgatory, as well as a passion for refuting it in favor of traditional evangelical teachings.<sup>7</sup>

### **Statement of the Researcher's Position on the Problem**

This researcher's position on the proposed research problem, which is the basis of the thesis, is as follows.<sup>8</sup> First, the Roman Catholic and the non-traditional evangelical doctrines of purgatory are in contradiction to the clear teaching of the Protestant canon of Scripture, and the Catholic teaching is not a necessary conclusion to be drawn from the Apocrypha. Second, both arguments for purgatory are inconsistent with the Bible's teaching of the sufficiency of Jesus' atonement, undermining the efficacy of both his passive and active obedience in relation to salvation, and both arguments create an unnecessary bifurcation between free will and monergistic glorification. The researcher will argue, therefore, that only the historic evangelical understanding of what happens

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<sup>6</sup> For a one year period in 2000, this researcher consistently dialogued with former Protestants who converted to Catholicism. This dialogue led him to step away from the pastorate for a season in order to determine if he might actually become Roman Catholic. However, he did not make the move, and returned to his Protestant roots with a renewed zeal and studied conviction regarding the truth of the historic evangelical teachings on the Christian fundamentals, including a rejection of the doctrine of purgatory.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis's teaching on purgatory are found, among other places, in his *Mere Christianity*, and *The Great Divorce*. Both are included in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Although developed in greater detail in what is presented below, these key points summarize the gist of this researcher's conclusions on the matter of purgatory.

when a believer dies, that he or she immediately enters into the blessedness of God's refreshing presence in perfect holiness, is the proper biblical position.

### **Definitions, Assumptions, and Delimitations**

For the sake of clarity at the outset, the following four definitions are offered relative to key terms used throughout this thesis. First, the term 'purgatory' is from the Latin *purgare*, meaning to make clean or purify.<sup>9</sup> As used within this thesis, purgatory refers to the experience of Christians who, upon death, undergo a purging of the remaining effects of sin in their soul. The duration of this purging depends on the severity of the remaining effects of sin, and the implicitness of cooperation between the one being purged and the work of God that accomplishes the purging.

Second, when the researcher references the term 'traditional evangelicals,' he means those Christians who affirm the sixty six books of the Protestant canon of the Bible as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice; who profess belief in the triune God who is one in essence and three in eternal persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; who profess that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity was fully God and fully man, one person with two natures, the human and the divine; who profess that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a substitutionary death on the cross, was raised bodily on the third day, and ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven, from whence he will return bodily and visibly to inaugurate the consummation of God's redemptive work; who profess that at death the Christian immediately enters into an

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Hanna, "Purgatory," New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>, accessed February 24, 2016. The additional portion of the definition that follows is also from Hanna, with the exception that the non-traditional evangelical advocates of purgatory focus more on its sanctifying, rather than expiating outcome.

intermediate state where his or her body remains in its final disposition on earth, and his or her soul experiences the presence of God in a paradise-like state, awaiting the final resurrection when body and soul will be reunited and glorified to live in the eternal new heavens and earth; who reject any idea of a purgatorial intermediate state such as taught by Roman Catholics and others.

Third, when the researcher uses the description ‘traditional Roman Catholics,’ he is referring to the Roman Catholic teachers who are considered traditionalists in their allegiance to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the Roman Magisterium. Rather than aligning with dissenting Catholics who frequently disagree with official Roman teaching on doctrine or moral issues, these traditionalists are careful to align their biblical exegesis and theological teachings with what is considered the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

Fourth, when the researcher references the term ‘non-traditional evangelicals,’ he means those who accept the majority of the things included in the definition of ‘traditional evangelicals,’ but profess that it is possible, if not likely, that Christians at death will experience some type of purgatory before the final resurrection and reunion of body and soul.

The following assumptions apply to the proposed research. First, the researcher assumes the Bible is the infallible, inerrant, authoritative, and sufficient Word of God. As such, it is the ultimate standard by which all doctrine is evaluated, and any tradition that is deemed true is such only insofar as it is consistent with and in submission to biblical teaching (cf., 2 Tim 3:16-17). Second, the researcher assumes that there is an intermediate state that believers enter upon death and consciously experience until the

final resurrection; they do not experience soul-sleep until the final resurrection (cf., 2 Cor 5:5-8).<sup>10</sup> Third, the researcher assumes the historic evangelical understanding of salvation as given wholly by grace and received by faith alone in Jesus Christ (cf., Eph 2:8-9). Even though the Roman Catholic teaching on salvation differs from the evangelical understanding, the Roman view of salvation will not be directly critiqued, but only insofar as it relates to the Roman understanding of purgatory as an expiatory experience.

In addition to these assumptions, the researcher acknowledges the following delimitations in conducting this research. First, the basic consideration of the Roman Catholic view of purgatory will be delimited to the teachings found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and those sources consistent with its teachings. While there are various teachings found in the contemporary Roman Catholic community regarding purgatory, including those who do not think the doctrine has a place within Catholic thought, only the official teaching of the *Catechism* will be considered. Second, the basic consideration of the non-traditional evangelical view of purgatory will be delimited to the teachings of Jerry Walls, a philosopher and theologian who currently teaches at Houston Baptist University. Third, the commentaries used in evaluating the biblical arguments of those on either side of the issue of purgatory are written from a conservative Roman Catholic or conservative evangelical perspective. Liberal commentators and proponents of higher criticism who do not affirm a high view of Scripture's reliability are not considered.

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<sup>10</sup> For a consideration of the arguments against soul-sleep, see John Calvin, *Soul Sleep* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), Kindle.



## **Conclusion**

Roman Catholics and some non-traditional evangelicals believe that when a Christian dies his or her soul enters into purgatory so that it might be purified before entering into God's presence in heaven. This researcher intends, through the thesis presented below, to demonstrate that neither the traditional Roman Catholic argument nor the non-traditional evangelical argument represent the best biblical conclusions. It will be argued that the proper understanding of what happens to a Christian at death is the traditional evangelical teaching that the saved soul enters into a pre-resurrection experience of perfect holiness and heavenly rest, awaiting the final reunion of body and soul at the last day. This introductory section considered these matters by stating the proposed research problem, its purpose, procedure, and importance; the researcher's position on the problem; and the definitions, assumptions, and delimitations related to the research. The next chapter provides a summary of the traditional Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Traditional Roman Catholic Teaching about Purgatory**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Two considers the Traditional Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory. The Roman Catholic teaching will be explained in light of its synergist and sacramental basis, finding much of its importance in the distinction between venial and mortal sins and their implication for the temporal and eternal status of the Christian, and the all-encompassing Roman teaching regarding initial, ongoing, and final justification.<sup>11</sup>

#### **A Summary of the Traditional Roman Catholic Teaching about Purgatory**

In order to properly assess the Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory, it is necessary to consider it within the broader understanding of salvation taught by Roman Catholic theology. The Roman system of salvation may be described as both synergistic and sacramental.<sup>12</sup> It is synergistic insofar as salvation is the outcome of divine-human cooperation. While Rome is not teaching that man is the initiator in salvation, or that man can save himself, Rome is teaching that cooperation with the grace of God is implicitly necessary in order for salvation to be realized. In this regard, Rome and historic Protestantism agree; man must receive the grace of God in order to be saved. The key difference, however, is how the cooperation between man and God is realized.

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<sup>11</sup> *Catechism*, 543-545.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

Protestantism emphasizes that the essential component in the cooperation is man's faith, while Rome's approach is profoundly different.<sup>13</sup>

This is where the sacramental aspect of the Roman system comes to the fore. Although Rome certainly emphasizes the role of faith in salvation, such faith is indiscernible apart from one's participation in the sacramental life of the Roman Catholic Church. Each sacrament communicates, in and of itself when properly administered, the grace of God, and when a person receives the sacraments by faith, the grace of God within the sacraments and to the person is even more efficacious. For conceptual purposes, the Roman system of salvation may be thought of as planks connecting together to make a walkway, with the sacraments being represented by the planks.<sup>14</sup> Each plank is essential to the whole walkway, and each plank helps the person move closer to the end of the walkway, to salvation.

At this point another distinction needs to be explained to better conceive of the Roman understanding of salvation. According to the Roman system, salvation may be thought of as justification experienced in three stages: initial justification, ongoing justification, and final justification. Whereas the Protestant approach generally understands salvation as including justification, sanctification, and glorification, in the Roman system the entire salvific process is about justification, with sanctification and glorification understood as part of the process of justification.<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that

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<sup>13</sup> *Catechism*, 53-54. One significant difference is the central place of the church in individual salvation.

<sup>14</sup> The analogy of planks as the path to salvation in the Roman system is not original to this author; he has heard it from both Roman and Protestant sources.

<sup>15</sup> *Catechism*, 543.

there is no concept of sanctification or glorification in Roman theology, but that for the Roman Catholic the two are part of the broader process of justification, while in Protestant theology sanctification follows justification and concludes in final glorification.

For the Protestant, justification saves the person, sanctification is the process of working out that salvation in holiness of life, and glorification brings the salvation received in justification and demonstrated in sanctification to its culmination in eternity. However, in Roman teaching the ideas of sanctification and glorification relate to the continual process of justification, with very little if any difference being maintained by Rome between justification and sanctification. Rather than the three-part, successive understanding of Protestantism (i.e., justification, sanctification, glorification), in the Roman system initial justification occurs when a person is baptized and the guilt of original sin is removed, and glorification is the eternal reward of those who achieve final justification through faith and good works.<sup>16</sup>

Building on this clarification, consider again the planks of the Roman system of salvation. Baptism is the first plank, as it washes away the guilt of original sin and provides initial justification. Once baptism is received, ordinarily as an infant in the Roman system, the person is now ready to continue receiving the sacramental grace of salvation. The next plank is reconciliation, also known as confession, where a person makes confession of his or her sin to the priest and he pronounces absolution.<sup>17</sup> The third plank is communion, by which the person receives what Rome teaches is the true body

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<sup>16</sup> *Catechism.*, 334-342.

<sup>17</sup> “It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent ‘pardon and peace.’” *Ibid.*, 397.

and blood of Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, what has been described as “the source and summit of the Christian life.”<sup>18</sup> These first three planks, baptism, confession, and communion, provide the ordinary means for a Catholic to experience initial (in baptism) and ongoing (in confession and communion) justification. The fourth plank, which provides yet another means to experience ongoing justification, is confirmation, at which time a person is confirmed publicly in his or her faith as a Catholic and “for the completion of baptismal grace.”<sup>19</sup>

There are three other sacraments in the Roman system, but they are not universally experienced by all Catholics like baptism, confession, communion, and confirmation. The other three sacraments are marriage, ordination, and anointing of the sick (which was ordinarily called ‘last rites’ by previous generations, since it was usually only done when someone was nearing death).<sup>20</sup> In each of these, when they are properly administered and received, the grace of God for ongoing justification is experienced.

In addition to the Roman sacramental system, one other nuance needs to be explained in order to lay the groundwork for understanding the Catholic conception of purgatory. In Roman theology a distinction is made between mortal and venial sins.<sup>21</sup> By mortal sins is meant a sin that involves a grave violation of God’s moral law with full knowledge of that law and clear intention to violate it. When a mortal sin is committed the consequence is that the grace or love that accrues in the soul through faithful

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<sup>18</sup> *Catechism*, 368.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 341, 423-424.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 506-509.

participation in the sacramental life is diminished or destroyed. Such destruction is only remediable through a repentant return to the sacraments, especially the sacrament of confession. However, leaving mortal sin unaddressed brings a great consequence. As the *Catechism* explains, “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him forever by our own free choice.”<sup>22</sup> The outcome described here is none other than hell. To die in a state of unrepentant mortal sin is to be eternally separated from God.

Venial sins are different from mortal sins insofar as, while they involve breaking the moral law of God, they are either lesser matters of the moral law or they involve grave matters that were violated without full knowledge, without a clear intention or both. Further, whereas mortal sins kill the grace and love of God in the soul, venial sins “do not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace, friendship with God, charity, and consequently eternal happiness.”<sup>23</sup> To summarize, mortal sins kill sacramental grace in the soul, venial sins do not; unrepentant mortal sins bring eternal separation from God. With this foundation laid, attention will now be given to how this sacramental system of Roman theology and its distinction between mortal and venial sins relates to the doctrine of purgatory.

According to the Catholic scheme, when a Christian commits sin, he or she incurs both an eternal and temporal punishment.<sup>24</sup> The eternal punishment is remitted when the Christian repents and seeks God’s sacramental forgiveness. The temporal punishment, be

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<sup>22</sup> *Catechism*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 508.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

it for mortal or venial sins, still remains. While a Christian may take certain actions in this life to become pure from the effects of sin, to include righteously and patiently enduring the sufferings and trials he or she may face, many will leave this life without being perfectly purified. In such instances, the purification continues after death in purgatory. The *Catechism* states, “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”<sup>25</sup>

In light of this overview of the Catholic teaching regarding the relationship between the sacraments, venial and mortal sins, and purgatory, the question is how the Catholic doctrine of purgatory is related to the Catholic understanding of the atonement. Regarding Jesus’ atoning death, the *Catechism* explains that “Christ’s death is both the *Paschal sacrifice* that accomplishes the definitive redemption of man...and the *sacrifice of the New Covenant*, which restores man to communion with God.”<sup>26</sup> The *Catechism* goes on to declare that in his work of atonement, “Jesus substitutes his obedience for our disobedience...Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.”<sup>27</sup>

While it is difficult for this researcher to conceive of any higher or richer description of what Jesus accomplishes on the cross than these words from the *Catechism*, there is a significant difference between how the Catholic and traditional evangelical understand the outworking of this accomplishment. This difference between

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<sup>25</sup> *Catechism*, 290.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 175. Italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

the two understandings provides the basis of the response in Chapter Four below, but at this point the Catholic position may be simply stated as such: Jesus' perfect obedience in life and sacrificial death on the cross made full atonement for the sins of man, providing a restoration of communion with God to all who will believe.

When a person, according to the Roman system, is baptized, the initial benefits of Jesus' life and death are the basis for his or her initial justification, which also enables the person to cooperate with and receive the sanctifying grace of God that is necessary to ongoing justification. Whatever transformation occurs in that person's life is due to the grace of God received synergistically through full participation in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, and any progress in holiness that person does not make, due to the impurities associated with venal and/or mortal sins, is, ultimately, a consequence of that person's choices; God makes perfect holiness in this life possible.<sup>28</sup>

When a person dies without perfect holiness, assuming he or she does not have unremitted mortal sin, that person will enter into purgatory where, based on the merit Jesus' atonement provides, they will continue to cooperate with the sanctifying grace of God until they are ready for final justification. On the one hand, purgatory is a consequence for failing to fully cooperate with grace in this life. On the other hand, a person's entrance into and experience of purgatory are based, in the final analysis, on the grace of God made available through the atonement of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death makes salvation possible and purgatory avoidable, but it also guarantees that those who accept

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<sup>28</sup> Those who achieve such holiness, or strive fervently and faithfully to that end, are what the Catholic Church refers to as saints. They are not in purgatory, but abide in the fullness of God's presence and serve as intercessors on behalf of the Christians on earth and, possibly, on behalf of the Christians in purgatory. The Catholic Church expresses the distinction between Christians on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven as "The Communion of the church of Heaven and Earth." *Catechism*, 270-272.



the gift of salvation initially will, if they persevere in faith and obedience, eventually receive the final salvation of body and soul in the new heavens and earth.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, the Roman Catholic teaching regarding salvation and purgatory involves several components, including the sacramental and synergistic process of salvation enmeshed with the seven sacraments, a distinction between venial and mortal sins and their consequences, and the “now and not yet” aspect of the atonement of Jesus in making salvation possible. For those that do not fully avail themselves of the potential for salvation demonstrated in holiness now, purgatory is the final place of purging and preparation for heaven. Is the traditional Roman Catholic view correct? The next section begins to answer this question by considering select texts, both from the Bible and from the Apocrypha, related to the issue of purgatory.

## Chapter 3

### A Discussion of Select Texts Related to the Issue of Purgatory

#### Introduction

The third chapter begins with a consideration of six biblical texts and one text from the Apocrypha related to the discussion regarding purgatory.<sup>29</sup> The biblical texts are Malachi 3:2-4; Matthew 5:25-26; Matthew 12:31-32; Luke 16:19-31; 1 Corinthians 3:10-17; and John 14:1-4. The apocryphal text is 2 Maccabees 12:38-46. The Roman Catholic and non-traditional evangelical arguments for purgatory from these texts are presented, both concluding that these texts either directly or by implication require an interpretation in support of the doctrine of purgatory. A traditional evangelical response argues that, rather than supporting purgatory, each of these texts either speaks of the eternal state of heaven or hell, employs literary devices such as euphemism, or looks to the final resurrection and final judgment. The foci of the traditional evangelical response is to show that, unless approached with an *a priori* commitment to the doctrine of purgatory, there are reasonable non-purgatory interpretations possible and likely for each text.

#### Six Biblical Texts Related to the Issue of Purgatory

##### Malachi 3:2-4

The first biblical text for consideration is Malachi 3:2-4, where the prophet describes “the day of His coming,” when God will “purify the sons of Levi, and purge

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<sup>29</sup> It is beyond the purview of this thesis to consider the legitimacy of the Apocrypha and why it is not included in the Protestant canon of Scripture. However, as will be argued, the apocryphal text in question can be engaged on its own merits from a hermeneutical perspective. While the apocryphal text provides a relatively small portion of the overall discussion, it is included due to its centrality to the traditional Roman Catholic position.

them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness.”<sup>30</sup>

The broader context speaks of a messenger who prepares the way for God’s coming to purify and purge his people (1), and that the outcome of the cleansing will be that God accepts his people’s offerings and brings judgment against further impurities (4-6).

Advocates for purgatory interpret Malachi 3:2-4 as providing the basis for purgatory by way of implication, even though they acknowledge that the passage likely refers to the final judgment. Francis de Sales, for example, notes that early church fathers such as Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome understood this passage as a reference to the end of time, but that the need for a final purging as described in the passage is an acknowledgment that purging is required, in general, before coming into the presence of God in heaven.<sup>31</sup> Thus, what Malachi speaks of is a specific reference to one purging at the end of time for those who are alive at the final resurrection, but Malachi also provides, by way of implication, the basis for a purging of those who die before the final day. God’s concern, according to this interpretation, is to demonstrate his commitment to purging his children, not to describe a one-time event on the final day.

However, arguing for purgatory by way of implication from the Malachi passage requires an *a priori* commitment to reading more into the text than is there. As Keil and Delitzch explain, rather than implying a doctrine of purgatory, the Malachi passage speaks of purification and purging in the sense of “judgment upon the godless members of the covenant nation,” such that God’s people are purified and purged by the removal of

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<sup>30</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Francis de Sales, *The Catholic Controversy*, Henry B. Mackey, trans. (Rockford: TAN Books, 1989), 358.

the wicked from their midst.<sup>32</sup> While this is still a purging, the emphasis in the passage is on God's purifying work at a particular moment in the life of the covenant nation, not on anything postmortem. Further, rather than describing a preparation of someone to enter the presence of God, the passage primarily speaks of punishing those who will never enter the presence of God. There is also a purifying of the people of God implied in this passage, but it is the priests of Levi who are Malachi's focus for purification, since national revival for Israel would require a restoration of true worship as led by a righteous priesthood. Such restoration is viewed by Malachi as future, pointing most likely to the future Messianic kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

It is true that any interpretation of this passage that focuses on the text must affirm that God is purging his people in order to make them righteous. However, what God is purging is wicked people from their midst, not necessarily wickedness from within them; while God certainly makes his people holy, personal sanctification is not the focus of this passage. Again, only by reading an *a priori* commitment to purgatory into the text is it possible to find in this passage support for purgatory. Recognizing that there is a purging process described is not the same as demonstrating that the passage teaches purgatory. The most that could be concluded without an *a priori* commitment is that the passage describes a purification process, and that purgatory is also a purification process; that is as far as the relationship between Malachi and the traditional Roman Catholic teaching legitimately goes.

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<sup>32</sup> C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Amazon Digital Services, 2014), 15932, Kindle.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 15955, Kindle.

## Matthew 5:25-26

The second biblical text related to the discussion of purgatory is Matthew 5:25-26. In this text Jesus urges his disciples to resolve conflicts quickly, lest they end up in prison (25), a place they will not leave until they “have paid the last penny” (26). The broader context of the passage is Jesus’ teaching that murder begins with anger in the heart (22), and that conflict with a brother or sister provides an impediment to worship that requires reconciliation before worship may be restored (23-24).

Proponents of purgatory interpret Matthew 5:25-26 as a warning from Jesus that those who refuse to reconcile with their adversaries will undergo some type of punishment that will last until the appropriate payment is made. The punishment, according to this interpretation, is purgatory. Tertullian, for example, interprets this passage as a warning of purgatory for minor offenses, based on Jesus’ use of the word translated “penny” in 26.<sup>34</sup> Just as the penny is a small amount of money, so the punishment and purification of purgatory is for lesser sins. Staples notes that the Greek word translated “prison” in 25 is the same word used in 1 Peter 3:19 to describe the holding place of the “spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient” in the days of Noah, a place which Staples concludes is purgatory.<sup>35</sup>

The problem with the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Matthew passage is not that it does not recognize a message of judgment in the words of Jesus, but that it concludes that such judgment is purgatory, instead of eternal separation from God at the

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<sup>34</sup> Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.iv.xi.lviii.html>, accessed December 3, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Staples, “Is Purgatory in the Bible?” <http://www.catholic.com/blog/tim-staples/is-purgatory-in-the-bible>, accessed December 3, 2015.

final judgment. Rather than interpreting this text as an allegory for purgatory, a non-purgatory interpretation is based upon an understanding that Jesus' words involve an allegory about eternal separation from God. When speaking of being "thrown into prison" (25), and "by no means get[ting] out of there till you have paid the last penny" (26), Jesus communicates the idea that if the judgment he warns of is actually experienced, it will be experienced forever. Wilkins explains that "remaining imprisoned until a debt is repaid down to the last penny elicits a sense of impossibility (5:26; cf., 18:34), since the debtor had no chance to work to create funds."<sup>36</sup>

Blomberg concludes that Jesus is warning of the judgment of hell, not purgatory, arguing that the force of the passage within its broader context is directed to the importance of living reconciled with others and avoiding God's final wrath on judgment day for an unrepentant, murderous heart.<sup>37</sup> Wilkins adds that the gist of Jesus' words is that his disciples must always seek reconciliation, rather than allow unreconciled anger to destroy a relationship, whether with brothers (23-24) or "adversaries" (25-26).<sup>38</sup> Refusing to seek this type of radical reconciliation is tantamount to murder, against which great judgment will be meted out on the final day, revealing that those with murderous hearts were not actually true followers of Jesus (cf., Matt 7:21-23). Does the passage in Matthew 5 speak of judgment? Certainly. However, the judgment it points to is better understood as hell, not a place of purging to better prepare someone for heaven.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, a vol. of *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 243.

<sup>37</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992), 108.

<sup>38</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 243.

## Matthew 12:31-32

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifically references Matthew 12:31-32 in support of purgatory, so it is the third biblical text for consideration.<sup>39</sup> In this passage Jesus speaks to his disciples regarding what is often described as ‘The Unpardonable Sin.’ Jesus is making the point that blasphemy against the Spirit (i.e., a denial of the overt work of God through Christ that is, rather than acknowledged as of God, attributed to the power of Satan), “will not be forgiven men . . . either in this age or in the age to come” (32).<sup>40</sup>

Advocates of purgatory interpret the ages Jesus speaks of in Matthew 12:32 (i.e., “this age . . . the age to come”) as a reference to this life and the intermediate state between death and the final resurrection. As the *Catechism* explains, “As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.”<sup>41</sup> Consistent with this interpretation, Roman Catholic interpreter Haydock explains that the passage teaches “that some sins may be remitted in the world to come; and consequently that there is a purgatory, or a middle place.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Catechism*, 291. In making this reference, the *Catechism* draws upon the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, Book Four, Chapter Thirty-Nine, [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory\\_04\\_dialogues\\_book4.htm#C39](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_04_dialogues_book4.htm#C39), accessed February 28, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1237.

<sup>41</sup> *Catechism*, 291.

<sup>42</sup> George L. Haydock, *Commentary on the New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Veritas Splendor Publications, 2012), 2521, Kindle.

Interpreting Matthew 12:31-32 in a manner supportive of purgatory fails to recognize both the Jewishness of the immediate context and the help the broader synoptical context brings to the interpretive task.<sup>43</sup> Stewart explains that the phrase “in this age or in the age to come” is a Jewish euphemism for ‘never,’ not something intended to cryptically introduce the idea that there is the possibility of forgiveness for certain sins and not others in a future purgatorial intermediate state. Nowhere in the passage is forgiveness for blasphemy promised, now or ever,

Further, as Stewart also discusses, in the synoptic gospels (cf., Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10) the language Jesus uses regarding blasphemy is very precise, omitting any reference to two ages, probably since Mark and Luke are writing to Gentiles not necessarily familiar with Jewish euphemisms. In Mark 3:29 Jesus states that “he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is subject to eternal condemnation,” and in Luke 12:10 he declares that “to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven.” Rather than finding purgatory in Matthew 12:31-32, careful consideration of the immediate and broader canonical context reveals that Jesus is making clear that blasphemy is a serious, damnable offense. As with previous passages of Scripture, the pro-purgatory interpreter must begin with an *a priori* commitment to the doctrine in order to find support for purgatory.

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<sup>43</sup> The argument in this paragraph is a summary of Don Stewart, “Is There Any Biblical Support for Purgatory?,” [https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don\\_stewart/don\\_stewart\\_123.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_123.cfm), accessed February 28, 2016.



## Luke 16:19-31

Luke 16:19-31 is the fourth biblical text for consideration. Therein, Jesus tells the story of a beggar named Lazarus, and an unnamed rich man. The beggar was beset with sores (20), and begged crumbs from the rich man's table (21), while the rich man enjoyed fine apparel and meals (19). Both men died, and the rich man is described as being in torment (23), while Lazarus is "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (22), where he is comforted (25). The rich man begs for mercy from Abraham, but is told that nothing will be done to relieve his suffering (26), nor will anything be done to warn his family members to avoid judgment, since they already had the word of God in "Moses and the prophets" (29, 31).

Interpreters who affirm purgatory appeal to this passage in support of their views based on the following.<sup>44</sup> First, Abraham calls the rich man who is in torment "Son," and the rich man calls Abraham "father," imploring him for mercy. This language only makes sense, according to the pro-purgatory interpretation, if there is actually a family relationship between the rich man and Abraham, which implies that the rich man is being punished but has not been forever cut off from the blessings of Abraham. Thus, the rich man is in purgatory. Second, the rich man demonstrates genuine concern for his loved ones (27-28), and a recognition that what is needed to avoid such suffering is repentance (30). How, the pro-purgatory interpreter asks, are such qualities possible in the soul of someone who is in hell? Rather than viewing the rich man as in hell, he should be viewed

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<sup>44</sup> Scott Hahn, "Purgatory: Holy Fire," <http://zuserver2.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgtc/hahn/m4/pg.html>, accessed December 3, 2015.

as in a transitional state in purgatory, where the reform of his will is already taking place in the descriptions Jesus gives.

The problems with the pro-purgatory interpretation in the Luke passage are three-fold.<sup>45</sup> First, pro-purgatory advocates assume that what Jesus describes is an actual occurrence between two real people with details that should be interpreted literally and in favor of purgatory. Rather than considering that this passage could be a parable and that the description of the interaction between Lazarus and the rich man is intended to communicate a parabolic lesson about rich and poor, unbelief and belief, the purgatory interpretation hinges on the unproven assumption that the story is literal and the details are speaking of purgatory, even though the passage is couched in a section of Luke containing several other parables (cf., 15:1—16:13; 18:1-14). The intention of Jesus as literal or parabolic is unclear; there is certainly no clear basis, however, to conclude this a literal account, nor that it is teaching purgatory. At best, the purgatory interpreters are right that the passage teaches something about judgment and reward.

Second, advocates of purgatory fail to explain the nature of the rich man's sins, although the broader context emphasizes a lack of faith and repentance on the part of the rich man and his family (29-31). These are more than the minor sins that purgatory is supposed to address, which means that if the rich man is in purgatory then the pro-purgatory interpretation introduces the possibility that someone can either be in a saving relationship with God in spite of unbelief and repentance, or that it is possible to experience postmortem conversion. These options ultimately undermine the doctrine of

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<sup>45</sup> The response related to the Lukan passage reflects the input of Dr. Michael Chiavone, one of this author's professors and a reader for this thesis.

hell by either redefining the necessity of faith and repentance in salvation (contrary to passages such as John 3:16 and Acts 2:38-40), or by extending into the postmortem state the opportunity to receive salvation (contrary to Heb 9:27).

Third, the descriptions of the postmortem experience of Lazarus and the rich man make a stark contrast between the rest Lazarus enjoys (16:25) and the intense, irremediable suffering the rich man endures (16:26). Regarding the rich man, there is no clear redemptive emphasis in the passage; rather, the emphasis is on reward and punishment in the postmortem state. Stein concludes that the broader Lukan context (cf., 6:20, 24) reveals Jesus' message of the "blessedness of the poor believer [as a recipient of the kingdom of God] (6:20) and the woe of the unbelieving rich [who receive their "consolation" in this life] (6:24)."<sup>46</sup> This distinction between blessedness and rest for the believing poor, of which Lazarus is certainly an example, and the temporal consolation from wealth but postmortem punishment for unbelief and unrepentance in the unbelieving rich, of which the rich man is an example, do not require a pro-purgatory interpretation. The emphasis in Luke 16:19-31 is, rather, the need for repentance and faith, and the promise of God's presence with those who suffer righteously. As in the case of examples discussed above, only an *a priori* commitment to purgatory would provide the basis for interpreting the account of the rich man and Lazarus in a pro-purgatory manner.

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<sup>46</sup> Robert A. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 422.

## 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

The fifth biblical text for discussion is 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, which presents Paul's admonition that the work of Christian ministry must be conducted with great care, warning that God will judge those who bring harm to his church. Paul communicates this message using the image of a builder who must carefully construct his building on the foundation that is already laid by another (10-11), and who must do so with the most valuable and enduring materials (12-13). Paul warns that a fire of judgment will one day reveal the quality of each person's work in building (13), resulting in reward for faithful builders (14), and loss of reward for unfaithful builders (15a), though the builder "himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (15b).

Arguing that in this passage, especially verse 15, "the [Roman Catholic] Church has found a foundation for its doctrine of purgatory," Montague explains that Paul's emphasis here is on the purging and purification that each person will experience in purgatory.<sup>47</sup> The fiery trial Paul speaks of is not limited to the final judgment (i.e., "the Day" in 13), but describes the regular experience of believers, especially those who do not exercise their gifts and callings with faithfulness. In his argument for a dual meaning for the judgment of verse 15, Haydock concludes that "the Day" (13) may be understood as "either the day of general judgment, or the particular judgment, when everyone is judged at his death, which sentence shall be confirmed again at the last day," and this dual meaning, therefore, provides the basis for which "divers of the ancient fathers, as well as later interpreters...prove the Catholic doctrine of a purgatory."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> George T. Montague, *First Corinthians*, a vol. of the *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1500, Kindle.

<sup>48</sup> Haydock, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 15995-16008, Kindle.

While it cannot be denied that Paul is discussing some type of positive or negative judgment related to individual works, what Paul describes is, as demonstrated by the emphasis Paul places on the judgment occurring on “the Day” (13), a once and final event in every believer’s, at least every minister’s, future. As one who does not think Paul intends to provide a basis for purgatory, Mitchell agrees. He interprets 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, especially 15, as a warning of the judgment some Christians will receive at the last day if their work of ministry is found lacking in substance.<sup>49</sup> Mitchell explains that Paul is not talking about a loss of salvation for those who receive the judgment, nor is he talking about an extended season of purging, but a sudden loss of reward related to ministry.<sup>50</sup>

Chiavone adds, “The man himself is never said to be in the fire. It is the man’s work which is manifested by fire, remains, or is lost.”<sup>51</sup> Taylor also concludes that Paul’s concern is the final loss of reward that some Christian workers will experience, since Paul’s use of “the Day” in 13 “refers to the eschatological day of judgment” in the sense of the judgment at the end of time<sup>52</sup> In support of this conclusion, Wright explains that Paul’s broader concern is that the Corinthians understand that there is continuity between this age and the next, a continuity that is demonstrated in how well one’s work endures at the resurrection and judgment that come at the end of this age; Paul’s emphasis is on the

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<sup>49</sup> Dan Mitchell. *The Book of First Corinthians: Christianity in a Hostile Culture*, a vol. in the *Twenty-First Century Biblical Commentary Series*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2009, 55.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Adapted from Dr. Michael Chiavone’s comments on the first draft of this thesis. (Cf., footnote 28 above.)

<sup>52</sup> Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Holman, 2014), 2289-2300, Kindle.

future moment of resurrection and transition that will usher in the final judgment and the new heavens and new earth.<sup>53</sup>

In their interpretation of this passage, Mitchell, Chiavone, Taylor, and Wright represent a consensus that acknowledge a final judgment resulting in reward and loss related to works, but nothing intended to substantiate a doctrine of purgatory. Once again, a pro-purgatory interpretation of this passage requires an *a priori* commitment to the idea of sustained purging prior to entering God's presence. Both pro and anti-purgatory advocates acknowledge in this passage some type of judgment associated with the final consummation, but a sustained period of purging must be read into the passage.

#### John 14:1-4

The sixth and final biblical text for consideration is John 14:1-4, wherein Jesus seeks to comfort his disciples in light of his coming departure. He senses that they are uneasy about the future, even fearful, and his words of comfort speak of what he will do for them when he departs. As he explains in 14:2, "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

Although this researcher did not find a single pro-purgatory interpretation of this passage, it is included in the discussion for the clarification it offers regarding the nature of the intermediate state the believer experiences between death and the final resurrection. Consider the insights of N. T. Wright, who explains that the word Jesus uses for "mansions" is from the Greek *mone*, "a temporary resting-place, or way-station,

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<sup>53</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3 in *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 284-285.

where a traveler would be refreshed during a journey.”<sup>54</sup> As Wright further details, the idea in Jesus’ words draws from Jewish apocalyptic writing related to the “chambers in which souls are kept against the day of eventual resurrection,” providing a safe resting place between death and the final resurrection at the last judgment.<sup>55</sup> Wright’s observations, rather than supporting the idea that the intermediate state is a place of purging, provide insight into God’s gracious intention in providing a place of rest and refreshment for those awaiting the final judgment. Such rest and refreshment are hardly consonant with the idea of a purging fire of redemptive suffering for those who “sleep” in Christ (cf., 1 Thes 4:14).

Before considering the passage in 2 Maccabees 12, two conclusions are offered regarding the brief review of biblical texts above. First, pro-purgatory interpreters consistently bring an *a priori* commitment to purgatory to their interpretation of the text, leaving them open to the charge that they are guilty of a variation of proof-texting-by-way-of-implication in order to support a previously held conclusion. Second, the entire notion of purgatory as a place of purging and redemptive suffering militates against the direct words of Jesus regarding his intention to make a place of refreshment and respite for his followers as they await the final resurrection. Moving beyond the biblical canon, the apocryphal text of 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 will now be evaluated relative to the question of purgatory.

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<sup>54</sup> Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 446.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 446.

## 2 Maccabees 12:38-26 in Relation to the Issue of Purgatory

Although 2 Maccabees is part of the Apocrypha and not part of the Protestant canon of Scripture, it is included in this discussion because it plays such a pivotal role in the argument for purgatory from the Roman Catholic perspective. Indeed, the primary ancient source relied upon by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the text in 2 Maccabees. As the *Catechism* states, “This teaching [of purgatory] is also based on the practice of prayer for the dead, already mentioned in Sacred Scripture: ‘Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin.’ From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them...so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.”<sup>56</sup> The reference made by the *Catechism* is to 2 Maccabees 12:38-46. For context in the discussion that follows, the full quotation is provided.

Judas rallied his army and went to the city of Adullam. As the seventh day was approaching, they purified themselves according to custom and kept the sabbath there. On the following day, since the task had now become urgent, Judas and his companions went to gather up the bodies of the fallen and bury them with their kindred in their ancestral tombs. But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had fallen. They all therefore praised the ways of the Lord, the just judge who brings to light the things that are hidden. Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened because of the sin of those who had fallen. He then took up a collection among all his soldiers, amounting to two thousand silver drachmas, which he sent to Jerusalem to provide for an expiatory sacrifice. In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious

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<sup>56</sup> *Catechism*, 291.



thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be absolved from their sin.<sup>57</sup>

The passage speaks of the actions of Judas Maccabeus upon finding that a number of his comrades fell in battle, presumably because they wore amulets associated with idolatry. Upon discovery of the amulets Judas did two things specifically relevant, according to the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation, to the idea of purgatory. First, he prayed that the sins of the warriors be removed. Second, he collected an offering and sent it Jerusalem so that a sacrifice could be made on behalf of the fallen. These two actions he performed with a view to the final resurrection, wanting to make sure that the sins of the fallen were absolved so that they might enjoy the reward of the just on the day of resurrection.

Based on these actions by Judas, the *Catechism*, as stated above, establishes its “scriptural” basis for purgatory. Without addressing why the text of 2 Maccabees is not considered Scripture from the Protestant perspective, the question of the meaning of the text can be asked. How, specifically, does what Judas did provide a sufficient basis for establishing the doctrine of purgatory? To conclude that purgatory is supported herein requires the following assumptions. First, it is required that the reader assume that as a result of their sins the fallen were in a state of purging until the final resurrection. Second, it must be assumed that the purpose of the expiatory offering made in Jerusalem was to relieve postmortem suffering. Without these two assumptions is it reasonable to conclude the doctrine of purgatory?

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<sup>57</sup> 2 Maccabees 12, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/2mc/12>, accessed February 25, 2016.

Here is the problem with these two assumptions. The first assumption has no support in the text, since a postmortem experience of purging and redemptive suffering is not mentioned here or anywhere in the Maccabean corpus. It is simply not there. The second assumption misses the clear statement in the text regarding the reason for Judas's sacrifice.<sup>58</sup> As 12:43 explains, the purpose of the sacrifice was Judas's concern for the final resurrection, demonstrated by these words, "in doing this [sacrifice] he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection in mind." Again, nothing in the text speaks of a state of postmortem purging, but the resurrection is clearly in view, and this is in keeping with both the Maccabean and prophetic understanding of a future resurrection followed by a final judgment.<sup>59</sup> Consider, for example, the words of Daniel 12:2 that there is coming a day when "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." The two assumptions necessary for the purgatory interpretation do not hold up under closer scrutiny. There is nothing in the text about postmortem purging, and the focus of Judas was clearly directed to the future resurrection.

In the final analysis, to so closely tie the argument for the doctrine of purgatory to 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 requires unwarranted assumptions on the part of the interpreter and, ultimately, the passage cannot bear the weight of the doctrine it allegedly supports. What may be stated for certain about the passage in 2 Maccabees 12:38-46 is that sin was committed and people died, and a pious leader offered prayers and sacrifice on behalf of

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<sup>58</sup> Adapted from the insights of Dr. Michael Chiavone, as shared in his review of the thesis's first draft.

<sup>59</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the role of resurrection in Maccabean thought, see Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 150-153.

the dead in light of his belief in the final resurrection and his desire that the fallen would enjoy its blessings. Again, nothing in the passage speaks of a purgatorial state.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter considered the biblical and apocryphal texts related to the doctrine of purgatory. Although advocates of purgatory find support for their position in these texts, arguments were presented that demonstrate that none of the biblical or apocryphal texts overtly support any teaching of purgatory.<sup>60</sup> Further, it is only through a failure by the advocates of purgatory to avoid unwarranted *a priori* commitments that a conclusion in support of purgatory is remotely possible. It was also demonstrated that what Jesus intends for his followers is a place of rest and respite when they enter the intermediate state between death and the final resurrection, not a place of purging and redemptive suffering. Moving from these biblical and apocryphal texts, the next chapter presents further reasons to reject the traditional Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory.

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<sup>60</sup> This is why, for instance, Roman Catholics like Cevetello admit that, “In the final analysis, the Catholic doctrine on purgatory is based on tradition, not Sacred Scripture.” J. F. X. Cevetello, “Purgatory: In the Bible,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2003), 825.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A Critique of the Traditional Roman Catholic Teaching about Purgatory**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Four presents a traditional evangelical critique of the traditional Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory. The critique will argue that the Roman position is incorrect for four reasons: first, it is contrary to Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 5:7-8 about what happens when a Christian dies; second, it is based on ambiguities and/or contradictions within the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; third, it diminishes the significance of the passive obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for justification; fourth, it diminishes the significance of the active obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for sanctification.

#### **Four Reasons to Reject the Traditional Roman Catholic Teaching about Purgatory**

##### **Purgatory Contradicts 2 Corinthians 5:7-8**

The traditional Roman Catholic position on purgatory should be rejected for the following reasons. First, the Roman position contradicts the teaching of Scripture regarding what happens when a believer dies. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 5:7-8 the following, "For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord." Paul urges the Corinthians to be confident that, when the physical body dies the believer will be with the Lord. Commenting on this passage, Garland explains, "The picture [Paul] paints shows that as soon as we are away from the physical body we are present with the Lord in a new dimension that is qualitatively different from our experience of the Lord's presence in the

body.”<sup>61</sup> In order to affirm that purgatory is the “qualitatively different...experience of the Lord’s presence” that Paul has in mind, the Roman perspective must completely ignore the broader context of Paul’s words, and it is difficult to see how purgatory is far more comforting and glorious. Quite the opposite.

For clarity, consider Paul’s teaching in light of his words in 4:7-18. Paul reminds the Corinthians that even though his ministry is beset with struggling and difficulty, even to the point of “always [being] delivered to death for Jesus’ sake” (11). Paul knows that this “light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (17). What is the glory of which Paul speaks?<sup>62</sup> He explains in 5:1-8, using several contrasts to speak of the greatness of the glory to come versus the temporary difficulty he faces in this life: his earthly home will be replaced with a heavenly one (1); he will be clothed in such a way that he will not be naked, but “further clothed” (2-4a); his mortality will be “swallowed up by life” (4); he is “at home in the body” and “absent from the Lord” in the sense that what the Spirit is given as a guarantee of (i.e., future glory; cf., Rom 8:23) will begin when Paul is with the Lord on the other side of death (5-6).

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<sup>61</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Holman, 2014), 5052, Kindle.

<sup>62</sup> Garland and Hodge discuss at length the possibility that the greater glory Paul writes of could be that, at death, Christians actually receive some form of a glorified physical body, rather than entering into God’s presence in a disembodied state. Garland argues that this is what Paul means, and that the intermediate body will be further glorified at the final resurrection, while Hodge argues that the language used by Paul is not focused on a body that is glorious, but an experience that is glorious; the Christian experience at death, argues Hodge, is entrance into a glorified state in which the soul is immediately glorified, and which will conclude at the resurrection when the body is finally glorified. Though beyond the scope of the present thesis to work through the details, this author does, in keeping with Hodge’s more traditional evangelical approach, conclude that Paul is speaking of a state of glory and not a glorious body. Either way, glory is the focus, not purging. See Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 4815-4889, Kindle, and Charles Hodge, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians* (Titus Books, 2013), 1822-1863, Kindle.

This is why, flowing from these varied contrasts, Paul declares his commitment to “walk by faith, not by sight” (7), since what is to come is far greater than what is; when he leaves this body in death he will be with the Lord in a qualitatively different experience of life (8). As Wesley explains in commenting on 5:8, “This demonstrates that the happiness of the saints is not deferred till the resurrection.”<sup>63</sup> The final resurrection will be glorious indeed (cf., 1 Thes 4:15-18), but those who die in the Lord prior to that time will also enjoy a glorious experience in God’s presence (2 Cor 4:17).

Hodge’s words are also helpful here, “Into [the Lord’s] presence the believer passes as soon as he is absent from the body, and into his likeness the soul is at death immediately transformed.”<sup>64</sup> This confidence of what is to come compels Paul to focus on his manner of life and conduct, so that he is “well pleasing” (9), to the Lord as he looks toward death and the final judgment (10). In making this transition from the hope of a Christian’s being with the Lord upon death to a focus on the final judgment of all people, Paul is placing the experience of believers at death within the broader context of cosmic eschatological concerns. Paul is saying that Christians must always live in light of the final day, a time in which God will judge all people, Christians and non-Christians.<sup>65</sup> In the meantime, as Christians see their own deaths approaching, they may take comfort that “to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord” (8).

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<sup>63</sup> John Wesley, *2 Corinthians: Explanatory Notes and Commentary* (Hargreaves Publishing, 2014), 508, Kindle.

<sup>64</sup> Hodge, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 1943, Kindle.

<sup>65</sup> This author agrees with Hodge that verse 11, rather than being directly related to verse 10 in the context of the final judgment, actually begins a new but related thought in Paul’s argument. Paul’s emphasis in 11 on persuasion is, according to Hodge’s approach, in keeping with Paul’s desire to defend his integrity to those in Corinth who were doubting his apostolic authority. Paul’s point is that, in light of the final judgment of all people, and his desire to be with Christ when he dies, he would not compromise his integrity; there was too much at stake. See *Ibid.*, 2023-2040, Kindle.

Before considering more carefully the traditional Roman Catholic approach to these verses, three points will help summarize Paul's teaching relevant to 2 Corinthians 5:7-8. First, Paul is making the case that when Christians suffer in this life, God uses the suffering to prepare them for a greater glory (4:7-15). Second, when Christians die they will leave their body and be in the presence of the Lord, experiencing that greater glory (5:1-8). Third, Christians must commit to live faithfully until they go to be with the Lord, always keeping in mind that there is a final judgment coming for all people (5:9-11). In all this, Paul does not teach anything about a purgatorial experience after death.

It is not, however, that Catholics do not offer an interpretation of Paul's words. Catholic commentator Haydock interprets Paul's words with a clear commitment to the doctrine of purgatory. Haydock writes regarding 5:8:

*We are absent from the Lord, and as it were pilgrims. He compares the condition of men in this mortal life with that of pilgrims far from their own beloved country, yet with hopes to arrive there, which makes them willing to undergo dangers, and makes Christians even resigned to death, to a separation of the body from the soul, that they may be present with the Lord, and enjoy him. But let everyone reflect that he must be judged, and receive a reward or punishment according to his works.*<sup>66</sup>

Notice that Haydock does not comment on the substance of Paul's words about being present with the Lord as soon as he is absent from the body. Instead, he interprets Paul's message as a demonstration that Christians are willing to undergo anything, even "separation of the body from the soul," to be with the Lord.

This is certainly true, but, as discussed above, Paul is saying more than something about the willingness of Christians to suffer for a greater ultimate purpose and destination; he is making a statement of what happens when a believer leaves this life

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<sup>66</sup> Haydock, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 17487, Kindle. Italics in original.

through death. A believer dies and is with the Lord. Granted, the traditional Roman Catholic is not denying that Jesus is with his children as they endure purgatory, so a pro-purgatory advocate could argue, though this author is not aware of any that do, that “with the Lord” means with Jesus in the midst of purgatory, but such a conclusion still conflicts with the Paul’s teaching that what comes after death is glorious. Only the traditional Roman Catholic’s *a priori* commitment to the doctrine makes it possible to find it in this text, and even then it contradicts the broader context, which clearly emphasizes that suffering in this life is used by God to prepare Christians for the greater glory they will experience as soon as they leave this body in death and enter into God’s presence.

In a different but related pro-purgatory interpretation, Stegman, writing in the *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture*, explains Paul’s words as expressing his desire to be with the Lord when he leaves the body, but not necessarily making a declaration of what will happen.<sup>67</sup> Rather than interacting with the direct words of Paul in 5:8, Stegman concludes his commentary on 5:1-9 by explaining that “because it is not up to [Paul] when he will pass on from this life, he sets forth in 9 his fundamental attitude in the here and now: **we aspire to please him.**”<sup>68</sup> However, while it is certainly the case that Paul give emphasis to the importance of pleasing the Lord, his concern to do so is not motivated by Paul’s uncertainty of his destination upon death, but precisely because Paul is so certain that he will be with Jesus in glory when he dies (cf., 4:17—5:6).

Consonant with the general Catholic emphasis on works and judgment in relation to purgatory discussed above, Stegman interprets Paul’s words not in keeping with the

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas D. Stegman, *Second Corinthians*, a vol. of the *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 2530, Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* Bold in original.



passage's hopeful and confident emphasis, but in a way that leaves open the possibility that Paul himself was headed to purgatory, even though he wanted to go to be with the Lord; nonetheless, Paul, according to Stegman, was committed to the best attitude. Both Haydock and Stegman appear to be consistent with traditional Roman Catholic teaching, but by avoiding actually commenting on Paul's specific words in relation to his broader context, and, instead, reading conclusions into the text, they miss the meaning of Paul's teaching. The words in 2 Corinthians 5:7-8 are contrary to, not supportive of, the doctrine of purgatory.

Purgatory is based on Inconsistencies in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Second, the traditional Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory is based on a contradiction within the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The problem arises when one compares the statements of the *Catechism* about what Jesus' death accomplished, especially regarding justification, with the *Catechism's* statements about purgatory.

When discussing the atonement of Jesus, the *Catechism* states that "Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father."<sup>69</sup> The language is clear: Jesus' death both addressed the faults of the sinner and made satisfaction with the Father. This is why the *Catechism* elsewhere refers to the death of Jesus as accomplishing "the definitive redemption of men," and states that "this sacrifice of Christ is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices."<sup>70</sup> The words "definitive" and "completes" are strong indications that the work of Jesus is both full and final in its salvific accomplishment.

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<sup>69</sup> *Catechism*, 175.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

With reference to Christ's sacrifice which, biblically speaking, is for the purification and holiness of the sinner, thereby removing a sinner's condemnation before God (cf., John 3:18; 1 John 1:7), the *Catechism* clearly aligns with the text of the New Testament. Compare John 1:29's description of Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world," and Hebrews 10:9's declaration that, since Jesus yielded himself to the Father's will in becoming the perfect sacrifice for sin, "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (It would be hard to imagine any words more consistent with the traditional evangelical explanations of the cross work of Jesus, especially in its definitive, all-encompassing sense in relationship to making believers holy and acceptable to God.)

However, when these words are compared with the following from the *Catechism* regarding the actions of others in doing works of penance on behalf of those in purgatory, the contradiction is apparent. In spite of the *Catechism's* strong language about Jesus atoning for faults and making satisfaction for sins, purgatory is described for those Christians who are "still imperfectly purified," and in need of postmortem "purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven."<sup>71</sup> How are they purified? They are purified through works of penance that they do and/or that others do on their behalf.<sup>72</sup> This contradiction between the *Catechism's* teaching on justification and its teaching on penance is the crux of the problem. As the *Catechism* states, only through the penance of the person or through the penance done for the person, is it possible to "recover his full spiritual health," and "make satisfaction for or expiate his

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<sup>71</sup> *Catechism*, 290.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 291. In this context almsgiving and indulgences are also included; both are human works.

sins.”<sup>73</sup> Which is it? Does Jesus provide spiritual health, make satisfaction for or expiate sins, or is it the work of the persons doing penance?

According to the *Catechism*'s teaching discussed above, Jesus' death is definitive and complete, but in discussing penance, which is an essential component to the teaching on purgatory, the *Catechism* teaches that it is human works of penance that make satisfaction and expiation for sin. This is a contradiction. In this instance the *Catechism* gives with one hand what it takes away with the other. What the *Catechism* states about the significance of Jesus' death in dealing with sin and the exemplary nature of his sacrifice is wholly incongruent with the Roman teaching on purgatory. This disconnect represents a *bona fide non sequitur*. These two ideas in the *Catechism* are incompatible; there certainly appears to be an internal problem with the *Catechism*'s teaching regarding the sacrifice of Jesus and the need for purgatory.

#### Purgatory Diminishes the Significance of Jesus' Passive Obedience

Third, the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory diminishes the significance of the passive obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for justification. The passive obedience of Jesus refers to his willingly accepting the wrath of God on the cross and bearing the guilt of the sins of the world. Grudem explains, “In addition to obeying the law perfectly for his whole life on our behalf, Christ also took on himself the sufferings necessary to pay the penalty for our sins.”<sup>74</sup> The emphasis with passive obedience is primarily, though not exclusively, on the death of Jesus. (Active obedience,

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<sup>73</sup> *Catechism*, 407.

<sup>74</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 571.

which is discussed next, is primarily about the life of Jesus.<sup>75</sup>) How does this relate to purgatory in the traditional Roman Catholic scheme?

By maintaining that purgatory exists for the sake of completing the purification process a person does not complete in this life, and that the purification process relates to the sin of the person, be it venial or mortal, Rome necessarily implies that Jesus' passive obedience was insufficient since the key to purgatorial purification is primarily through human works of penance and their alleged satisfactory and expiatory value, not the imputation of the merits of Jesus' passive obedience to the believer.<sup>76</sup> Rather than finding completion in the work of Jesus on the cross, Rome finds a first step at purification that the person must then follow-on with his or her own actions in order to move from initial, to ongoing, to final justification.

The *Catechism*, in discussing the death of Jesus on the cross, states that "in the redeeming love that always united [Jesus] to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"<sup>77</sup> However, if Jesus truly identified with fallen humanity in experiencing being forsaken by God due to sin, and if the wrath of God was truly poured out upon Jesus in that state of identification, why is there still a need for purgatory, or for any acts of penance in this life or in purgatory that attempt to remit sins

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<sup>75</sup> As Grudem discusses, some object to the distinction between passive and active obedience, noting that all Jesus' obedience was active. However, the distinction does help distinguish between what Jesus did in living obeying the law (active obedience) and what Jesus did in receiving the penalty for disobeying the law (passive obedience). See *Ibid.*, 527, footnote 3.

<sup>76</sup> Cf., the discussion in the second reason for rejecting purgatory discussed above.

<sup>77</sup> *Catechism*, 171.

that were supposedly dealt with on the cross?<sup>78</sup> The Catholic answer is that conversion is not just a once-for-all event. Initial conversion occurs in baptism, and ongoing conversion occurs in a continual commitment to the sacrament of confession and the concomitant requirement of penance, since Christians are “at once holy and always in need of purification, [and are to follow] constantly the path of penance and renewal.”<sup>79</sup>

As discussed above, it is through the sacrament of confession and its necessary penance that the sinner is able, insofar as he does true works of penance that involve contrition, confession, and satisfaction, to “recover his full spiritual health” and “make satisfaction for or expiate his sins.”<sup>80</sup> Notice that it is the penitent who makes satisfaction and expiation through his or her works. While Catholics may respond that what the penitent does is in union with Jesus, it is still the person who accomplishes this by their own works, rather than enjoying the blessings of satisfaction and expiation freely given in Jesus by virtue of his perfect passive obedience.

In the Roman system, Christians are always needing purification and constantly on the path of penance if they are to ever behold the glories of heaven. This is not, however, in keeping with the biblical account of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to all who believe, since, as Paul makes clear in Romans 4:25, the Son of God “was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.” If this be true, where is the need for penance or purgatory? The passive obedience of Jesus

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<sup>78</sup> *Catechism*, 406-407. It is important at this point to recognize that repentance, which is clearly described as the appropriate response of the Christian to sin (cf., 1 John 1:8-9) is not the same as penance. According to the *Catechism*, penance is the proof of repentance, whereby a person makes reparation for his or her sins through prescribed acts that merit forgiveness and restoration.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 407.

makes these things unnecessary and, in light of God's clear teaching in Scripture, purgatory is offensive to the gospel.

#### Purgatory Diminishes the Significance of Jesus' Active Obedience

Fourth, the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of purgatory diminishes the significance of the active obedience of Jesus Christ and its implications for sanctification. As mentioned earlier, active obedience refers to the life Jesus lived in perfect submission to and fulfillment of God's law. Grudem explains that "Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us. He had to obey the law for his whole life on our behalf so that the positive merits of his perfect obedience would be counted for us."<sup>81</sup> What passive obedience secures, active obedience demonstrates and applies in the life of the believer.

However, much like the way purgatory undermines the significance of passive obedience, so it diminishes the place of active obedience. Purgatory makes both the death and life of Jesus insufficient for the believer to be made fully right in his or her standing with God. For the sake of discussion, allow that somehow the passive obedience of Christ only made initial justification possible, removing the guilt and penalty for all sins committed to the point of initial conversion. Does it not follow that the active obedience of Christ, his perfect righteousness, would benefit the believer in securing his or her ongoing and final justification, making the Christian life more about gracious growth in Christ-likeness than about purging, satisfying, and expiating?

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<sup>81</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 570.

Here, again, is the fundamental flaw in the Roman soteriological system: Jesus enables much for the believer, but he actually accomplishes nothing for certain, since a person's faith and good works are the final basis upon which salvation is received. This is certainly contrary to Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:8-10, wherein he clearly explains that salvation is by God's grace, received through faith and not accomplished by works, even though works certainly follow as a product of, but not the cause of, salvation.

Likewise, rather than merely making something possible for the believers, somehow enabling them to merit salvation but not actually accomplishing it for them, the writer of Hebrews uses definite salvific language in Hebrews 9:12, explaining that it was "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood [that Jesus] entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." Jesus has obtained redemption, not merely made it possible. As with the negative impact it makes on Jesus' passive obedience, so purgatory is an offense to the gospel message that is revealed in Jesus' active obedience.

Two comments from Martin Luther offer his insight into why purgatory is an unacceptable teaching. Notice how both of the comments are relevant to the immediately prior discussion of the passive and active obedience of Jesus. In his lectures on Genesis, delivered in 1535, Luther states that "purgatory is the greatest falsehood because it is based on ungodliness and unbelief; for they deny that faith saves... We die in faith in Christ, who died for our sins and rendered satisfaction for us."<sup>82</sup> Luther also addresses purgatory in one of his Table Talks, declaring "as for purgatory, no place in Scripture

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<sup>82</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21-25," vol. 4 of *Luther's Works*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 424.

makes mention thereof, neither must we in any way allow it; for it darkens and undervalues the grace, benefits, and merits of our blessed, sweet Savior Christ Jesus.”<sup>83</sup>

These statements demonstrate that for Luther it is in Jesus that the completion of salvation is found, and in Jesus alone.

### **Conclusion**

What is a traditional evangelical response to the traditional Roman Catholic teaching about purgatory? This chapter answered this question by presenting reasons to reject the Roman teaching, including that the Roman position is contradictory to both Scripture and the *Catechism*, and it undermines the sufficiency of Jesus’ passive and active obedience. In the next chapter the non-traditional evangelical teaching about purgatory is summarized, and two reasons are presented from the traditional evangelical perspective as to why the non-traditional position should be rejected.

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<sup>83</sup> Martin Luther, “Of Purgatory,” in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. by William Hazlitt, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/tabletalk.v.xix.html>, accessed November 10, 2015.



## Chapter 5

### The Non-Traditional Evangelical Teaching about Purgatory

#### Introduction

Chapter Five considers the non-traditional evangelical teaching about purgatory and offers a traditional evangelical response. The non-traditional teaching on purgatory will be demonstrated to, while holding many of the traditional evangelical convictions regarding the nature of salvation, follow a path closely tied to perfectionist teaching and heavily influenced by Roman Catholic soteriology. A traditional evangelical response will argue that the non-traditional position on purgatory is incorrect, in addition to several of the reasons already discussed above related to the traditional Roman Catholic position, for three reasons: first, it fails to explain how the thief on the cross (cf., Luke 23:32-43) was promised to be with Jesus in Paradise upon his death; second, it creates a bifurcation between free will and the possibility of monergistic glorification.

#### A Summary of the Non-Traditional Evangelical Teaching about Purgatory

In his book, *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*, Jerry Walls addresses purgatory, as a Protestant, from three perspectives.<sup>84</sup> First, Walls considers the historical development of the doctrine of purgatory, including a discussion of objections to the doctrine at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Second, Walls summarizes the various views of purgatory around three headings: the satisfaction model that emphasize the expiatory role of purgatory in making satisfaction for sins (this is the view most closely

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<sup>84</sup> The interaction in this chapter is focused on Walls, although this author recognizes there are other Protestants who espouse some variation of the doctrine of purgatory. For a more thorough treatment of the topic involving multiple Protestant pro-purgatory arguments, see Walls, *Purgatory: The Logic of Transformation*, Chapters 2, 3, and 6.

reflecting the traditional Roman Catholic perspective discussed in chapter three); the satisfaction/sanctification model that is based on a part expiatory and part transformative understanding of purgatory; the sanctification model that, rather than associating purgatory with an expiatory work, only focuses on its sanctifying aspects as a means to achieving real existential holiness prior to heaven.<sup>85</sup> Third, Walls offers his own understanding of purgatory, much influenced by what he describes as the “Mere Purgatory” of C. S. Lewis, as consistent with the sanctification model.<sup>86</sup> Walls views purgatory as the logical extension of God’s love in bringing his children to be fully sanctified. He states that “purgatory on this account is not in any way about satisfying divine justice or paying a debt of punishment. It is entirely a matter of continuing and completing the process of sanctification, of making us truly holy so that we can be fully at home in the presence of God and enjoy his presence with no troubling shadows to darken our fellowship with him.”<sup>87</sup>

Walls’s sanctification approach to purgatory may be summarized as follows. First, he recognizes that purgatory is not explicitly taught in Scripture. However, rather than argue for purgatory from only tradition or philosophy, Walls concludes that, “the doctrine is a reasonable inference from things that are clearly taught in scripture.”<sup>88</sup> Second, Walls considers whether or not the doctrine of purgatory is compatible with evangelical theology. He argues that the primary concern of the Protestant Reformers was to reject

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<sup>85</sup> Walls, *Purgatory*, 1320-2086, Kindle.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 3523-4060, Kindle.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1993-2000, Kindle.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 4090, Kindle. The word “scripture” is not capitalized in the original.

the satisfaction model of purgatory, but that contemporary Roman Catholic theologians, in disagreement with traditional Roman Catholic teaching, tend to view the doctrine more in terms of sanctification. (Contemporary Catholics do so in spite of the fact that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as discussed above, clearly identifies purgatory and its attendant works of penance with a satisfactory and expiatory (i.e., justifying) role.)

Walls goes on to point out that there is debate even within Protestantism about whether or not justification is to be understood in relation to the imputation of Jesus' righteousness, citing disagreements over the various 'New Perspectives' on Paul espoused by N. T. Wright and others.<sup>89</sup> For Walls, this provides the impetus to argue for an approach to justification that makes sanctification and justification closely related, such that the entire salvific enterprise is more akin to a process of becoming saved than a declaration of salvation in justification that results in its outworking through sanctification and its culmination in glorification.<sup>90</sup> In his final analysis regarding the possible compatibility of purgatory and evangelical theology, Walls concludes that there is enough variance within evangelical teaching to allow for purgatory.

This brings Walls to his third point in explaining purgatory, that it is inextricably linked to how human freedom interplays with God's work of grace in sanctification. Walls declares that, "the most crucial matter on which the whole issue turns [is], namely, what role does our free response play in our salvation . . . Is it necessary for us truly and

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<sup>89</sup> Walls, *Purgatory*, 4101-4116, Kindle. In this regard, Walls cites N. T. Wright, *Justification* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009). Additional works related to the question of the imputation of Jesus' righteousness include Ralph Smith, *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2003), and Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 4116, Kindle.

actually to become holy that we undergo a process of moral transformation in which we freely cooperate, or can this transformation be effected by a unilateral, instantaneous act of God the moment we die?”<sup>91</sup> For Walls the answer is clear: if God chooses, as in the traditional evangelical formulation of what happens upon a Christians’ death, to immediately complete the work of sanctification and perfect the believer in holiness, then God is doing something inconsistent with human freedom and true love. If God were to carry out this type of instantaneous work producing holiness, Walls is concerned that humans would not recognize themselves, and that such immediate change is not in keeping with the necessity of temporal, successive/progressive, incremental transformation which purgatory alone, not God’s direct act, can produce when free moral agency is preserved.<sup>92</sup>

Finally, Walls concludes his explanation of purgatory by asking whether or not God is willing to do everything short of coercion to bring men and women to salvation, including the possibility that purgatory provides an opportunity for “postmortem grace and probation” so that Christians who do not achieve perfect sanctification in this life, something Walls considers possible, can continue to grow in grace in a postmortem state, and also so that non-believers who might have come to saving faith with more time and influence can possibly be saved postmortem. Walls’s statement near the end of his work is telling in this regard:

If there is a perfectly good God, there is reason to hope that our lives will not end in death or ultimate futility, but rather that our lives have ultimate meaning. There is reason, moreover, to hope that our moral efforts are not in vain, that good will triumph...not only on the cosmic scale, but in our own individual lives...This

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<sup>91</sup> Walls, *Purgatory*, 4119, Kindle.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 4126, Kindle.

reminds us one more time that purgatory, properly understood, is not an alternative to grace, but is itself an expression of grace.<sup>93</sup>

With this summary of Walls's position on sanctifying purgatory complete, two reasons are now offered as to why, from a traditional evangelical perspective, Walls's teaching is to be rejected.

## **Two Reasons to Reject the Non-Traditional Evangelical Teaching about Purgatory**

### Purgatory Fails to Explain the Thief on the Cross

First, the non-traditional position on purgatory fails to adequately explain the promise made by Jesus in Luke 23:32-43 to the thief on the cross regarding Paradise. The setting of the passage is Luke's crucifixion narrative, and Luke describes one of the thieves as hostile and disrespectful to Jesus, while the other defends Jesus (39-40). The thief who defends Jesus goes on to confess that he and the other thief are guilty and deserve their punishment, but Jesus "has done nothing wrong" (41). After making his confession of guilt and professing Jesus' righteousness, the thief asks Jesus to remember him upon coming into his kingdom; Jesus replies with a promise that "today, you will be with Me in Paradise" (42). The term "Paradise" has Old Testament precedent referring to a grove of trees or a garden (cf., Gen 13:10, Eccl 2:5), and in the New Testament speaks of the final resting place of the righteous (cf., 2 Cor 12:24; Rev 2:7), although Wright explains that it could also indicate a temporary resting place.<sup>94</sup> Either way, in the Luke

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<sup>93</sup> Walls, *Purgatory*, 4140-4154, Kindle. The ambiguity in this statement regarding the possibility of postmortem conversion is striking. At Kindle location 4070 in *Purgatory*, Walls makes the following statement that appears to be an endorsement of this postmortem possibility: "I have been arguing that the doctrine of purgatory makes best sense of how our cowboy [mentioned in the first part of book], and countless other Christians who die far short of perfection, as well as others who have not yet accepted Christ, can be appropriately transformed and fitted for heaven."

<sup>94</sup> See Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 438, and Stein, *Luke*, 593.

passion narrative Paradise is where Jesus is going, and he promises to take the thief along, leaving the clear indication that it is a place of rest; there is nothing purgatorial about Paradise in Luke's description of Jesus' promise to the thief.

This is relevant to Walls's purgatory teaching in the following two ways. First, there is no indication in the text, nor is there warrant to draw the conclusion, that the thief was fully sanctified prior to his death. This man was a condemned criminal, and by his own admission he was guilty of the crimes and deserving of the punishment he was receiving. His conversion on the cross certainly brought him to Jesus, but the man did not have time to undergo what Walls describes as the necessary, incremental, true growth in experiential holiness before death. Yet, Jesus promises the man will be at rest in Paradise that very day, presumably as soon as he dies. How can this be unless Jesus was also going to fully sanctify this man in holiness as he passed from death into Paradise?

This reveals the second way in which the experience of the thief is relevant to Walls's teaching; it portrays the man's free choice of Jesus, and necessarily implies that Jesus was going to transform the man and make him fit for heaven as part of the salvation the man willingly received. The man chose Jesus and, as a gracious consequence, Jesus chose to change the man. As will be discussed below, Walls creates an unnecessary bifurcation between freedom and the monergistic act of God in instantaneously completing a Christian's sanctification at death, stating that freedom and monergistic acts are irreconcilable. However, the thief on the cross is an example of this happening.

#### Purgatory Unnecessarily Bifurcates Free Will and Monergistic Glorification

Second, the non-traditional position on purgatory creates a bifurcation between the free will and the possibility of monergistic glorification. In Walls's account of

purgatory, libertarian freedom is given a place that is second only to the non-coercive love of God. As discussed above, Walls does not accept that it is in keeping with God's loving disposition to immediately and unilaterally complete one's sanctification at the process of death, since doing so appears to Walls to deny the role of human freedom in what he concludes is a necessarily incremental and gradual growth in holiness. This conclusion by Walls assumes that it is impossible to have freedom and monergistic action in the same person's experience.

However, Walls's position has two problems. First, his idea that sanctification must be gradual and incremental, while it may be true in the experience of many Christians, is in no way universally true or necessary. Just as Jesus immediately transformed Saul on the way to Damascus (cf., Acts 9:1-9), so he sometimes transforms people immediately in ways that give them significant progress in holiness in an instant, and the only action of the person's will to the point of his or her transformation is the willingness to accept Jesus' lordship over all of life.

This lordship raises the second problem for Walls's position that freedom of will is incompatible with a unilateral, divine transformation of a person at death. As a question the problem may be considered as follows: What if the initial request for Christ to forgive, save, and transform includes with it the person's implicit acceptance that God will complete sanctification at the moment of death? There is nothing contradictory in this idea, and it has been the fundamental testimony of evangelical Christians for centuries. As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* explains regarding the disposition of a Christian's soul upon death, "The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence,

immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”<sup>95</sup> The unilateral work of God in accomplishing this is a product of the initial choice to receive his lordship; there is no contradiction.

### **Conclusion**

It is not only Roman Catholics who espouse some teaching of purgatory. As discussed above, non-traditional evangelicals like Jerry Walls argue that purgatory, rather than a place of making satisfaction for sins, is a place of continuing sanctification. This continuing sanctification, according to Walls, is a necessary corollary to the true freedom that God gives to man and the true love God has for man, consistent with the broadest tenets of evangelical faith and reasonably deduced from biblical ideas. A traditional evangelical response, building upon the response above to the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory, presented two reasons why Walls and other non-traditional evangelicals are wrong about purgatory. These reasons are that the non-traditional evangelical teaching of purgatory does not explain Jesus’ promise to the thief on the cross that he would be with Jesus in Paradise that day, and that Walls creates an unnecessary bifurcation between free will and the unilateral act of God to complete the Christian’s sanctification at the moment of death. The next chapter presents the conclusion to this thesis, offering a summary of

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<sup>95</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXIII.I, [http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster\\_conf\\_of\\_faith.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html), accessed February 29, 2016.



the traditional evangelical response to purgatory, as well as suggesting areas of further scholarly inquiry related to the topic of purgatory.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

Traditional Roman Catholics and non-traditional evangelicals teach that purgatory, a place of postmortem purging and purification, is the means by which God completes the process of perfecting those who would be with him in heaven. Traditional evangelicals have historically disagreed with such teachings, advocating that the believer, upon death, immediately enters into the presence of God and enjoys perfect holiness while awaiting the final resurrection of the body. In this final chapter a summary is presented of the evaluation of biblical and apocryphal texts considered above, as well as the reasons given above as to why the traditional Roman Catholic and non-traditional evangelical teachings of purgatory are wrong. The chapter closes by restating the central problem addressed in this thesis and its significance, and offers suggestions for further scholarly inquiry regarding purgatory.

#### **A Combined Response to the Doctrine of Purgatory**

There are several reasons why a traditional evangelical should reject the teaching of purgatory, be it presented by traditional Roman Catholics or non-traditional evangelicals. Those reasons are summarized as follows.

First, purgatory is not taught in Scripture, nor is it necessary to conclude that purgatory is the most reasonable interpretation of the key apocryphal text (2 Macc 12: 38-46) referenced in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Second, purgatory directly contradicts the account of Jesus and the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43, the teaching of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:7-8, and the teaching of the *Catechism* regarding the definitive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Third, purgatory diminishes the efficacy of both the active and passive obedience of Jesus in relation to the believer's salvation.

Fourth, purgatory creates an unnecessary bifurcation between human freedom and the monergistic actions of God on behalf of the Christian.

### **Suggestions for Further Scholarly Inquiry Regarding Purgatory**

Although beyond the purview of the present research, additional scholarly inquiry in the area of purgatory is suggested in three areas. First, in the area of the patristic teachings regarding purgatory and any influence they manifest from pagan and gnostic thought. Second, in the area of the veracity of the Apocrypha, and why it is not included in the Protestant canon of Scripture. Third, in the pastoral impact of the teaching of purgatory on the doctrine of Christian assurance.

### **Conclusion**

To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord; this is the testimony of countless Christians as they reflect upon the teaching of Scripture and the witness of church history. Purgatory calls this claim into question, whether it be from a traditional Roman Catholic or non-traditional evangelical perspective. This thesis has sought to challenge such teachings, urging Christians to see purgatory as unnecessary and errant, and to rejoice in the hope that when they close their eyes in the place of the dying, they will open them in the presence of the Lord of Life, with whom are blessings forevermore.

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