



## IN SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

The truth about purgatory is affirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (see 1030–1032) and is a defined dogma of the Church, part of the solemn teaching of three ecumenical councils: Lyons II (1274), Florence (1439), and Trent (1545–63). This teaching has its roots in Scripture and ancient tradition, though the word *purgatory* doesn't appear in Scripture.

Any biblical or historical reference to God's people praying, making sacrifices, or performing other actions on behalf of the dead assumes that a purging process exists after death, and that our actions on behalf of the dead can help them through it. Actions on behalf of those who are in hell would be futile, and actions on behalf of those already in heaven would be unnecessary. Consider these actions on behalf of the dead as noted in the following Scripture: 2 Maccabees 12:44–46; Sirach 7:33; 1 Corinthians 15:29–30; 2 Timothy 1:16–18 (apparently, the man being prayed for here is dead).

The ancient Jews prayed and made sacrifices for the dead to help them be purged and forgiven. Early Christians did the same, long before the New Testament books were written or placed in the canon by the Catholic Church. Some of the oldest liturgies include prayers for the dead, and many of the earliest Christian tombstones bear inscriptions asking for prayers for the person buried there.

Catholics have never lost that belief and the accompanying practices. Scripture simply reflects that ancient, consistent belief and practice through the "hints" of purgatory it provides, though the term itself came into use only later to describe the process Christians had always known to be a reality.

## THE PROCESS HAS ALREADY BEGUN

Of course, this process has already begun in the lives of the faithful on earth. Through acts of penance, and through accepting in faith the inescapable sufferings of the present life, we can be purged of sin's effects and grow in holiness. But most of us will still need to complete the process of purging away the consequences of sin.

For this reason, God has graciously provided purgatory for our cleansing. It will not be a third possible destination after death, different from hell and heaven, as some have mistakenly believed. It will be instead a process that ultimately leads us to heaven.

Once we understand the nature and purpose of purgatory, we will welcome the reality. It's an expression of God's mercy. In his desire to save us, he loved us enough to send his Son to die for us, and he loves us too much to leave us the way we are.



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**By Paul Thigpen**

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# WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES Purgatory



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*“You, therefore, must be perfect, as  
your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

— Matthew 5:48

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“You ... must be perfect,” Jesus insisted, “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Without such perfect holiness, Scripture says, “no one will see the Lord [in heaven]” (Heb 12:14), because “nothing unclean shall enter it” (Rv 21:27). But how many of us will have become perfect by the time we die, making us ready for heaven?

If we haven’t yet arrived at perfect holiness, does God just give up on us when we die? Or will he simply bypass our free wills to make us instantly perfect when we die, without our cooperation? He certainly doesn’t operate that way in this life.

Instead, the Catholic Church teaches, after someone has died in friendship with God, the Lord will bring to completion the process of making that person holy, of purifying that soul, which he had already begun in this life. And that process is what we call *purgatory*.

Why is it God’s ultimate intention for us to become perfect? God wants us to live forever in friendship with him, and he himself is completely holy — without sin or weakness of any kind. So, to see God face-to-face in heaven, and to know, love, and enjoy him there fully forever, we must be like him.

Heaven simply wouldn’t be heaven unless those who live there are perfected. If we were to bring along with us the sins and weaknesses we have in this life, heaven would be just as full of troubles as our life on earth — troubles that would last for eternity. Such a fate would be more like hell than heaven.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Some will ask: Didn’t Christ die to forgive us our sins and save us? Yes! But even those who have escaped, through his infinite merits, the penalty of hell — an eternity without God — find that sin has countless other consequences.

The *forgiveness* of sins has to do with the remission of *guilt* — and by guilt we mean the damage to the relationship between God and the sinner that results from sin. When we receive God’s forgiveness, he cancels our guilt in the sense that he lays aside our offense against him, against his goodness and holiness. He chooses not to let the sin come between us, to keep us apart. He restores our friendship with him so that we won’t spend our eternity alienated from him — that is, an eternity in hell.

But guilt is by no means the only consequence of sin. Sin also disorders our souls. It injures others. It leaves us overly attached to things we have chosen to love more than we love God.

If we are to live with God forever, then repairs and reparation are necessary — that is, we must be healed (repairs), and we must make amends (reparation). If we’re selfish, we must learn to love. If we’re deceitful, we must learn to tell the truth. If we’re addicted, we must break the addictions. If we’re bitter, we must forgive.



## CONSENT AND COOPERATION ARE REQUIRED

This process of repair and reparation doesn’t take place instantaneously by some divine action — not in this life, and not in the next. By its very nature, it requires not only our consent, but also our cooperation.

Consider this analogy: Suppose a driver injures himself and totals another person’s car in a collision because of his willful recklessness. As the ambulance arrives at the hospital, he expresses remorse for his misbehavior. In response, the other driver forgives him — that is, the other driver chooses to let go of the personal offense and not hold it against him, not seek to take him to court and sue him, or not exact revenge in other ways.



Nevertheless, other consequences of the reckless driver’s sin must still be dealt with. His broken bones must be set. The wrecked cars must be paid for. His driver’s license might even be suspended until he successfully completes a course that trains drivers to be responsible.

The process will not be pleasant. Having broken bones set is painful. Paying for a wrecked car is costly. Learning to change lifelong habits is wearying.

Even so, the process is restorative — a matter of both mercy (the repairs) and justice (the reparation). In the end, the reckless driver, by submitting to the process and cooperating with it, will be a new person.

The truth is that we’ve all wrecked our lives, and the lives of others, to one extent or another. Whether in this life or the next, however, God doesn’t bypass our free will to fix the situation, as if we were robots to be rewired. Instead, we undergo a process to undo what we have done: paying our debts, letting go of whatever binds us, straightening out whatever is crooked within us, learning to “drive” right.



## IS PURGATORY PAINFUL?

Is purgatory painful? The biblical texts that have traditionally been interpreted as allusions to purgatory certainly make it sound as if it’s painful. Consider St. Paul’s words about purging “fire” (see 1 Cor 3:10–15) and Jesus’ warning about “prison” (Mt 5:25–26).

The great teachers of the Church through the ages who have written about purgatory seem to be largely in agreement that it is extremely painful. This conclusion should not surprise us. After all, even in this life, the process we must endure to be purged of the consequences of sin is a painful one.

Like metal with impurities, we must be put through a refiner’s fire. Like a patient with a cancerous growth, we must have the growth cut away or cauterized. It hurts, but our healing requires it. God uses painful adversity in this life to purify us; purgatory is simply a continuation of that painful trial, presumably more intense and concentrated.

Nevertheless, we should take consolation in the teaching of St. Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510), in her “Treatise on Purgatory.” She insisted that the souls in purgatory, though they suffer terribly, are more focused on God than they are on their own sufferings. Despite the pain, then, they also have marvelous joy. They know that they are nearing the end of their journey to heaven and entering there, at the last, is assured.

Think of the excruciating pain a mother must endure in the process of childbirth. Yet her pain is accompanied by great joy over the child who is coming into the world. The purgatorial process, we might say, is like the “birth canal” through which we enter heaven.