

# Saved, but as Through Fire

*Purgatory — The Final Purification of the Saved*

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## **I. The Most Misunderstood Doctrine**

Of all the Catholic teachings the Watchtower rejects, purgatory is perhaps the most misunderstood — and not only by the Watchtower. It is routinely imagined as a kind of second hell, a place of suffering where the half-good are punished for a while before being let into heaven; or as a “second chance” for those who died estranged from God; or as a Catholic device for earning, by one’s own pains, a salvation the gospel says is free. If purgatory were any of these things, it would deserve to be rejected. It is none of them.

This page assumes what is argued on its own page: that the soul survives death, conscious, to meet God. The Watchtower’s rejection of purgatory follows almost entirely from its denial of that survival — if no one exists between death and resurrection, there is obviously no one to purify. Granting the soul’s survival, the real question can be asked: does Scripture teach a final purification of the saved before they enter the joy of heaven?<sup>1</sup>

## **II. Why the Watchtower Rejects It**

The Watchtower’s rejection of purgatory has two roots. The first, and decisive, is soul-sleep: since the dead are held to be unconscious and nonexistent, there is no one in any intermediate state, no one to be purified, and no point in praying for the dead. On this view purgatory is impossible before it is even unscriptural. The second objection is one it shares with much of Protestantism: that purgatory detracts from the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, adding human suffering to a redemption he completed alone.<sup>2</sup>

The first objection is answered on the soul page and simply assumed here: the dead in Christ are conscious and alive to him. The second is a serious theological point and deserves a careful answer, which it will receive below — for purgatory, rightly understood, does not compete with the cross but flows from it. But first the doctrine itself must be stated accurately, since so much of the disagreement rests on a picture of purgatory that no Catholic actually holds.

## **III. What Purgatory Is — and Is Not**

The Church’s definition is precise: purgatory is the *final purification* of “all who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified,” so that they may “achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.” Three things in that definition are easy to miss and essential to grasp.<sup>3</sup>

First, purgatory is *only for the saved*. Everyone in it died in grace and friendship with God, and everyone in it is infallibly bound for heaven; not one soul there will be lost.

Second, it is a *purification*, not a trial: not a place where one's eternal fate still hangs in the balance, and not a "second chance" for the unrepentant, whose fate is fixed at death. Third, it is therefore best thought of not as a "third place" between heaven and hell, but as the *threshold of heaven* itself: the antechamber where those destined for glory are made ready for it. The fire of purgatory, whatever it is, is not the fire of the damned but the fire of a love that finishes what it began. That is not this essay's flourish but the teaching of a pope. Benedict XVI, in his encyclical on hope: "Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour... His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation 'as through fire'. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God" (Spe Salvi 47).<sup>4</sup>

#### **IV. The Watchtower's Answer, Examined**

The Watchtower's case is put concisely in the jw.org article "Is Purgatory Mentioned in the Bible?" Its answer — "No, it is not" — rests on four claims: the word is absent from Scripture; the blood of Jesus "cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7); the dead are unconscious and so cannot be purified; and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), so that death itself is sin's full punishment. The texts are Scripture; the conclusions do not follow from them.<sup>5</sup>

Start with the absent word. That the Bible does not contain "purgatory" proves nothing about whether the doctrine is scriptural, for the absence of a word is not the absence of a teaching. Scripture nowhere contains the words "Trinity," "omnipresence," or "Bible," and the Watchtower itself teaches under names Scripture never uses — "Governing Body," "theocratic organization." The only question that matters is whether the *thing* the word names is taught there, and that is what the sections below argue from the texts themselves.

Next, the blood that cleanses. That "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7) is common ground, and purgatory claims no other source of purification. But the verse names the *agent* of the cleansing, not its *timetable*. Nothing in it says the blood's work must be finished by the moment of death, and observation says otherwise: the cleansing that begins at baptism has demonstrably not run its course by the deathbed, for no one dies with every fault healed. The Catholic claim is simply that the same cleansing continues after death until the soul is purified for the life of heaven. A verse describing the power that purifies cannot be evidence against that purification's completion.

Third, the unconscious dead. Here the article reasons: "A person who has died cannot feel anything and therefore cannot be cleansed by any fire of purgatory." Notice the premise

doing all the work — that the dead are unconscious. That is not a finding of Scripture but the Watchtower’s own doctrine of the soul, the very point in dispute, so the argument is circular: it refutes purgatory only for a reader who has already accepted the Watchtower’s anthropology. And the premise is not scriptural in any case. Paul expects that to depart is to “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23) and that to be away from the body is to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8); John sees the souls of the martyrs awake beneath the altar, crying out for judgment (Rev. 6:9–10); and the Lord Himself says that God “is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:32). Ecclesiastes 9:5, taken as a doctrine of the grave, is the mail carrier’s reading again: the address correct, the household unknown (an illustration developed on this site’s home page). That reading is answered in full on the companion page “When We Die: Does the Soul Survive?”<sup>6</sup>

Last, the wages of sin. From “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23) the article concludes that “death is the full and complete punishment for sin,” leaving nothing for purgatory to do. But punishment and purification answer different questions. Punishment concerns the *guilt* of sin; purification concerns what sin has done to the sinner — the disordered attachments and half-healed habits it leaves behind in the soul. A debt can be paid in full while the damage is still being repaired. This is at bottom the same dispute as imputed versus infused righteousness, treated on the companion page “Is *Sola Fide* True?”: if righteousness were only a status credited to the believer, nothing in him would remain to be finished; because it is a real holiness worked into him, whatever is unfinished at death must be completed before he sees God (Rev. 21:27). Nor will Romans 6:7 — “a dead person has been absolved from sin” — bear the weight, for the death Paul has in view there is the baptized man’s death *with Christ* to sin (Rom. 6:3–11), not a promise that dying biologically settles every account. And the article cannot have it both ways: it cannot make Christ’s blood the payment for sins in one paragraph and each man’s own death “the full and complete punishment” in the next.<sup>7</sup>

## **V. Saved, but as Through Fire**

The clearest single witness is St. Paul. Writing of the day of judgment, he says that each person’s lifework will be tested by fire. “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, *though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire*” (1 Cor. 3:14–15).

Read the description carefully, for it fits nothing in the Watchtower’s scheme. Here is a man who is *saved*, so this is not hell, from which no one is saved. Yet he “suffers loss” and passes “through fire,” so this is not heaven as the Witnesses (or anyone) conceive it, for in heaven there is no loss to suffer and nothing to burn away. What Paul describes is a third thing: a saved man passing through a purifying fire that consumes his worthless

works while he himself comes through to glory. That is purgatory, named in all but the word: a salvation that is sure, reached *through* a cleansing fire.<sup>8</sup>

## **VI. Prayer for the Dead**

A second witness comes not from argument but from practice — the ancient practice of praying for the dead, which makes sense only if the dead can be helped. In the Second Book of Maccabees, Judas Maccabeus, after a battle, has sacrifices offered in Jerusalem for his fallen soldiers, “that they might be delivered from their sin”; and the inspired writer praises this as “a holy and pious thought,” concluding that “it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins” (2 Macc. 12:44–46).

The logic is inescapable. One does not pray for the dead who are in heaven — they need no help; nor for the dead who are in hell — they are beyond it. Prayer for the dead makes sense only if there is a state in which the dead can still be assisted toward final purity — which is exactly what purgatory is. This was the settled conviction of faithful Jews before Christ, and it became the universal practice of the early Church, whose catacombs and earliest liturgies are full of prayers for the departed. Neither Jesus nor the apostles ever rebuked the practice; the Church simply continued what Israel had already begun.<sup>9</sup>

## **VII. Forgiveness in the Age to Come**

Jesus himself drops a quiet but telling hint. Warning of the gravity of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, he says it “will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt. 12:32). The words repay attention. To say that a particular sin is forgiven in *neither* age implies that *some* sins may be forgiven in the age to come — for the qualification would be pointless if no sin could ever be forgiven after death.

The Fathers of the Church, Augustine and Gregory the Great among them, drew exactly this inference: there is a forgiveness that reaches beyond death, for those who die in God’s grace but with lesser faults unrepented or debts unpaid. This is not a second chance for the damned, but the loosing of the venial debt of the saved — the final clearing of accounts for those already bound for heaven. Jesus’ own phrasing leaves the door open to precisely what the Church teaches.<sup>10</sup>

## **VIII. The Argument from Holiness Itself**

Behind these particular texts lies an argument from the very nature of heaven, and it may be the most persuasive of all. Scripture sets two truths side by side. On the one hand, *nothing unclean can enter heaven*: “Nothing unclean shall enter it” (Rev. 21:27), and “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). On the other hand, *most of the*

*saved do not die perfectly holy.* They die in grace, truly God's friends, but with disordered attachments, half-healed wounds, small sins unrepented, the work of sanctification real but unfinished.

Put those two truths together and the conclusion is unavoidable. If nothing unclean can enter heaven, and yet the saved who die imperfectly purified are truly going to heaven, then there must be *something* between their death and their entrance — a purification that completes what was unfinished and makes them fit to see God face to face. That necessary something is what the Church calls purgatory. The doctrine is, in the end, not an awkward addition to the gospel but a straightforward consequence of taking *both* the holiness of heaven and the imperfection of the dying Christian with full seriousness. Deny purgatory, and one must either lower the holiness heaven requires or despair of the imperfect; affirm it, and both are honored.<sup>11</sup>

## **IX. Not Against the Cross, but From It**

There remains the serious objection — shared by the Watchtower and the Reformers — that purgatory detracts from the finished work of Christ, as though his sacrifice had left something for us to suffer on our own account. This deserves a clear answer, because it rests on a misunderstanding of what purgatory is.

Purgatory does not *add to* the cross; it *applies* the cross. The purification it works is not a second, rival source of salvation, but the final stage of the one salvation Christ won: the completion, in the believer, of the holiness the cross purchased for him. Consider: no one says that growth in holiness *during this life* (the slow, often painful work of being conformed to Christ) detracts from the cross; on the contrary, it *flows from* it (Phil. 2:12–13). Purgatory is simply that same sanctification carried to completion for those in whom it was unfinished at death. It is the cross reaching its goal in us, not a supplement to it. The fire is the fire of Christ's own purifying love, and the soul it cleanses it cleanses by his merits, not its own. Grace finishes what grace began.<sup>12</sup>

The objection with the most history behind it is the traffic in indulgences, and the first thing a Catholic should say is that the charge is true. Men sold what cannot be sold; relief for the dead was hawked like grain; and the scandal was great enough that the Council of Trent abolished the office of the pardoner outright. The Church's own judgment on that trade is not gentler than Wittenberg's.

But notice what the objection assumes. Luther's theses of 1517 attack the sale while presupposing the souls: they argue about what an indulgence can and cannot do for the dead in purgatory, and the eighty-second asks why the pope, if he can free souls, does not empty purgatory "for the sake of holy love." An abuse does not abolish the thing abused, or the Lord's Supper would have ended at Corinth, where it was being profaned by

drunkenness and contempt for the poor (1 Cor. 11:20–22). Paul’s remedy was to correct the abuse and keep the sacrament. Trent’s was the same.

## **X. Conclusion: Made Ready to See God**

The Watchtower rejects purgatory chiefly because it has first denied the survival of the soul; remove that denial, and the doctrine not only becomes possible but begins to look necessary. Scripture shows us a man “saved, but as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15); a faithful people praying that their dead “might be delivered from their sin” (2 Macc. 12:46); a Lord who hints at forgiveness “in the age to come” (Matt. 12:32); and two fixed truths — that nothing unclean enters heaven, and that the saved do not all die spotless — whose only reconciliation is a purification between death and glory.

And that purification, rightly seen, is not a grim addendum to the gospel but one of its tenderest mercies. It means that God’s purpose for the imperfect is not rejection but *readiness* — that he will not turn away the friend who dies still flawed, but will finish in him the good work he began (Phil. 1:6), cleansing away the last stains so that he can bear the sight of unveiled Glory. Purgatory is the love of God refusing to leave his children half-made. It is the last and gentlest stroke of the Sculptor’s hand, making the soul at last fit for the only thing that can ever satisfy it: to see God, and be like him, face to face.

## Endnotes

1. This page assumes the conscious survival of the soul, established on the companion page “When We Die: Does the Soul Survive?” The Watchtower’s rejection of purgatory follows directly from its doctrine of soul-sleep: if the dead are unconscious and nonexistent, there is plainly no one to be purified, and prayer for the dead is pointless. So, as with heaven and hell, the prior question governs. Granting that the soul survives — as the New Testament teaches — the question here is whether Scripture warrants a purification of the saved after death.
2. The Watchtower rejects purgatory entirely, as an unscriptural Catholic invention. Given its premises this is consistent: if the soul does not survive death (see the companion page on the soul), there can be no intermediate state of purification, and the practice of praying for the dead is meaningless. See “What Happens to the Soul at Death?” and “Is There a Purgatory?” (jw.org). The Watchtower also objects that purgatory detracts from the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice.
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§1030–1032: “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. The Church gives the name *Purgatory* to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.” Three points are essential and often missed: purgatory is only for the *saved*; it is a *purification*, not a second probation or a “second chance”; and everyone in it is infallibly bound for heaven.
4. Purgatory is frequently misrepresented (sometimes by its critics) as a “third place” between heaven and hell where one’s eternal fate is still undecided, or a “second chance” for those who died unrepentant, or a way of “earning” a salvation Christ has not fully won. It is none of these. It is the *antechamber of heaven* — the final cleansing of those already saved and already destined for glory. No one in purgatory will be lost; no one there is being given another opportunity to repent; and the purification rests entirely on the merits of Christ, applied to make his people fit for the holiness without which “no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). The burns-and-saves passage is Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (2007), 47, quoted exactly — with the encyclical’s British spellings — from the copy in the site’s reference library.
5. “Is Purgatory Mentioned in the Bible?” (jw.org); its quotations of Scripture are from the New American Bible — a Catholic translation.
6. Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Revelation 6:9–10; Matthew 22:31–32. Ecclesiastes 9:5 is the Preacher’s observation of life “under the sun” — what death looks

like from the mortal side — not a doctrinal pronouncement on the soul; the companion page “When We Die: Does the Soul Survive?” takes up the exegesis.

**7.** The death in view in Romans 6:3–11 is baptismal: “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death” (v. 3), and the baptized are to consider themselves “dead to sin and alive to God” (v. 11). On imputed versus infused righteousness, see the companion page “Is *Sola Fide* True?”

**8.** 1 Corinthians 3:11–15. Paul says each builder’s work will be tested by fire on the day of judgment: “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, *though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*” Here is a person who is *saved*, yet who passes *through fire*, suffering loss as his imperfect works are burned away. This is neither heaven (where there is no loss to suffer) nor hell (from which one is not “saved”); it is a purifying passage of one already destined for glory — precisely what the Church means by purgatory.

**9.** 2 Maccabees 12:38–46. After a battle, Judas Maccabeus finds that fallen Jewish soldiers had carried pagan tokens, and takes up a collection to have sacrifices offered in Jerusalem for their sins, “that they might be delivered from their sin.” The inspired author commends this as “a holy and pious thought,” concluding that “it is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins.” This presupposes a state after death in which the dead can still be helped by the prayers of the living — not heaven (where help is not needed) nor hell (where it is not possible). Note: 2 Maccabees is part of the Catholic and Orthodox canon; even where its canonicity is disputed, it is firm evidence that faithful Jews before Christ already prayed for the purification of the dead — a practice Jesus and the apostles never condemned, and which the early Church continued.

**10.** Matthew 12:32: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit “will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” The phrasing implies, as Augustine and Gregory the Great observed, that some sins *can* be forgiven in the age to come — otherwise the qualification “or in the age to come” would be empty. There is, then, a forgiveness that reaches beyond death for those who die in grace with lesser faults unremitted; the venial debt is loosed in the purification.

**11.** The structural argument from the nature of holiness: “Nothing unclean shall enter” the heavenly city (Rev. 21:27), yet “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14); and “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Most of the saved, honestly examined, die neither perfectly holy nor wholly impenitent, but in grace and yet with disordered attachments and unhealed faults. If nothing unclean can enter heaven, and yet these are truly saved, there must be a purification between death and glory that makes them fit to see God. That necessary purification is purgatory; the doctrine is, in a

sense, simply the logical consequence of taking *both* the holiness of heaven and the imperfection of the dying saint seriously.

**12.** Purgatory does not detract from the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, as the Watchtower (and many Protestants) object; it *applies* it. The fire that purifies is not a second source of salvation alongside the cross, but the working-out, in the believer, of the holiness Christ won for him — as sanctification in this life does not rival the cross but flows from it. Purgatory is simply sanctification completed: the last stage of being conformed to Christ (Rom. 8:29), carried to its finish for those in whom it was unfinished at death. It is grace, not works; mercy, not merit.

## **For Further Reading**

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1030–1032 (purgatory, the final purification). Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

*The Roots of Purgatory*, Catholic Answers. Free online at <https://www.catholic.com/tract/the-roots-of-purgatory>.

*Is Purgatory Mentioned in the Bible?*, jw.org. Free online at <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/is-purgatory-in-the-bible/>.

*Spe Salvi*, Benedict XVI (2007)—§§45–48 on the fire that burns and saves. Free online at [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html).

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*“He himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” — 1 Corinthians 3:15*

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*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end. Amen.*

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**A Note on Authority**

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.