

Purgatory
All Souls
(Wis 3:1-9)

The Scriptures give three images to help understand the sufferings of Purgatory, and a fourth image to complete our understanding of this mysterious doctrine.

The primary image of Purgatory (as of hell) is that of **fire**. But unlike the fire of hell, which is the torment of the damned, the fire of purgatory is something positive, and joyfully accepted by the soul, because it purifies and prepares one for God's presence. This is a very common image found in the Bible, as for instance in the first reading from the book of Wisdom: "*As gold in the furnace, he proved them*" (Wis 3:6). Purgatory is a fire that purifies and perfects, burning away sin and all that is unworthy of God, for "*nothing impure shall enter [heaven]*" (Rv 21:27). St. Paul, when describing the Day of Judgment before God, also uses this image. He says our entire life work will be tested in fire. That which is good and worthy of God (Gold, Silver) will pass through safely, but that which is unworthy, worldly, or useless (Wood, Hay, Straw) will be burned away. Someone may be saved, but not without loss, and only by passing through fire (1 Cor 3:12-15).

Another image, used by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, is that of a **prison**.¹ Purgatory is a dark place where the soul is yet without the presence of God, and paying a debt, suffering a punishment. When describing the day of judgement, and how to live our lives in preparation for that day, Jesus says, "*Settle with your opponent on the way to court, lest you be handed over to the Judge, and you be put in prison. Amen I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny*" (cf. Mt 5:25-26). Sin incurs an obligation of debt toward God and our neighbor whom we offended. Repentance requires penance, the duty to right the wrongs we committed, make up for our offenses, undo the damage we caused, in other words take full responsibility for our actions. This is accomplished on earth through prayer and good works undertaken in union with Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, which indulges our meager efforts with abundant grace. What is not completed before we die, is paid in full in the mystery of the purgatorial penitentiary.

A third important image is the **gate**. Ultimately, Purgatory is not some "third place" in addition to heaven and hell. It is part and parcel of "heaven." Purgatory is the process of coming fully into heaven when we die, it is the gateway of heaven. Jesus describes this gate as a very small and narrow one. That is to say, it is difficult to enter heaven, it does not take place without a degree of suffering.

¹ St. Peter also uses this image in his first letter (1P 3:18-20). Cf. below

“Enter by the narrow gate” (cf. Mt 7:13-14). *“It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle eye [gate] than for a rich man to enter heaven”* (cf. Mt 19:24). To pass through this narrow gate, one must be stripped of all baggage, all attachment to the world.

Thus Purgatory is a process of being purified, freed of debt, and stripped of attachments so that the soul is entire free of anything that would keep it from being peacefully and joyfully in the presence of God. All these things already pertain to this life. But the Doctrine of Purgatory proclaims that what is not completed before we die, must be completed after death in a final intense way, if we are to attain the presence of God in the Beatific Vision. The fact that something more takes place after death is made clear, again, by St. Paul when he speaks of the fire after death (1 Cor 3:12-15), and by the example of Judas Maccabeus, who offers prayers and sacrifice on behalf of the dead, for the forgiveness of their sins (2 Macc 12:39-45).

There is a final image of Purgatory given in the first letter of Peter, when he speaks of the mystery of Christ’s descent into hell (Sheol) after the crucifixion: *“He went and **preached** to the spirits in prison”* (1 Pt 3:19). These spirits are all the holy souls in Sheol belonging to the Old Covenant. Before they can enter heaven, something is needed: the fullness of the revelation of Christ. What Christ preaches to them is the “Gospel,” the Good News, which is to say, himself. Jesus *is* the Gospel, the “Way, the Truth, and the Life.” For the souls in prison, at this moment, what was obscure becomes clear, what was known only by prophecy is now known in person, what was imperfect becomes perfect. In this moment after death, the holy souls who lived before Christ pass from the Old Testament into the New; they become fully “Christian.”

No one can enter heaven except through Christ, as a true and perfect Christian. Purgatory after death is therefore a place not only for final purification from sin and debt, it is also the place where one is fully instructed in the truth, where the fullness of the Gospel is revealed and understood, where errors and inadequacies in understanding are corrected, and where earlier preparatory covenants (Noah, Abraham, Moses) are brought to fulfillment. One may die in an incomplete or imperfect faith but one does not enter heaven except in the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a beautiful thought to realize that Purgatory culminates, or ends, when one sees fully and clearly the person of Jesus Christ. The instant he is seen clearly and the fullness of the Gospel becomes clear, the Father and Holy Spirit are also seen through him. At that moment, one possesses the Beatific Vision, one is “in heaven.”