

Catholic belief in the purging of sin in the flames of some imaginary “purgatory,” no punishment of the sinner could ever cleanse him of his sin.

God is perfect in holiness and cannot fellowship with sinners. It’s not a question of policy—whether or not a soft attitude would encourage sin. It’s a matter of who God is, the very nature of His being. He cannot compromise with evil, cannot go back on His word. *Cannot? Yes, cannot:* “He cannot deny himself” (2 Tm 2:13). And that is why the penalty for sin is *eternal* death—not extermination, but separation from God forever!

Willful defiance of God cannot be tolerated. This is not harshness on God’s part; it is the inevitable consequence of sin. A breach of God’s moral laws can no more be allowed than a breach of the physical laws. The outcome is demanded by the very nature of the act itself and by the God who has been defied. The law of gravity cannot suddenly be reversed (just in this case, please!) for a person falling from the top floor of a 50-story building, whether he fell accidentally, jumped, or was shoved.

God has pronounced the penalty for sin. If He went back on His Word, how could we believe anything else He said? By the very definition of who God is and by the nature of sin, the penalty for sin must stand. But man cannot possibly pay it; only Christ could, and He did. The proof that He paid the penalty in full is that He conquered death and rose from the grave. The only remedy for death is *resurrection*. Jesus said, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (Jn 11:25-26).

No one has yet experienced death in its awful fullness and finality—its utter separation from God, the “lake of fire...the second death” (Rv 20:14)—no one, that is, but Christ, who “taste[d] death for every man” (Heb 2:9). No wonder, as He took our place under God’s just judgment, He cried out in agony from the Cross, “My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46).

The rich man in hell is a pitiful example of spiritual blindness unto death. He had spent a lifetime attempting to satisfy his innate spiritual thirst for God with riches and success. And now in hell, he cannot escape that tragic delusion. His

physical tongue is in the grave with his dead body, but he imagines it is parched with physical thirst—and he asks Abraham to send Lazarus with just “the tip of his finger” bearing a drop of physical water to cool his “tongue” (Lk 16:24). He disdained the “water of life” when God offered it, and now in hell, he doesn’t even recognize the nature or cause of his thirst. All of his life he sought to physically quench a spiritual thirst, and now that thirst will burn forever for the water of life that he despised when it was available to “who-soever will” (Rv 22:17).

Jesus said, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink” (Jn 7:37); and of the rabbis He said, “Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life” (Jn 5:40). A physical drink of water tastes so good for the same reason that thirst hurts so bad: water is essential to our physical bodies. So it is with the water of life. It is absolutely essential for the life of the soul and the spirit. Thus, the lake of fire will be the torment of a burning spiritual thirst beyond description for *the same reason* that heaven will be a satisfaction beyond our present imagination.

The burning thirst that can’t be quenched in the lake of fire will never end for the same reason that the unspeakable ecstasy in heaven will not cease for all eternity: “In thy presence is fullness of joy, at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps 16:11). God made us for Himself, for His love, His joy, His companionship. To be separated from Him in death is to agonize in endless torment for what the redeemed in heaven experience.

May we fully awaken in this life to the truth of our eternal inheritance so that we may love and praise our Lord as we ought, without waiting until heaven to do so. And may we be used of God to awaken many unsaved to come to Christ and drink of the water of life while they still have the opportunity.

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Why?

Most parents have been frustrated (or amused) by a small child’s persistent question, “Why?” repeated almost endlessly. Every attempted answer brings yet another inevitable, “But *why?*” Even young children recognize that there must be a reason for everything. The relentless “Why?” reflects the instinctive search for an ultimate answer beyond which there are no more questions. For some, this natural curiosity begins a search for God, the One who promised, “Ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13). Too often, however, the search is never with the whole heart; and what may have begun as honest seeking soon sours for one invalid reason (excuse) or another.

As children grow older and disappointment turns into cynicism, many lose interest in vital questions and their lives center around worldly trivia. The God-implanted spiritual thirst of the soul for the One who “is love” (1 Jn 4:8) and who made man for Himself, and for the spiritual “water of life” that only Christ can give (Jn 4:14; 7:37-39; Rv 22:17), is misunderstood as a thirst of the body for something physical. What should be an echo of “my soul thirsteth for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:2; 84:2) becomes “I thirst for money, sex, pleasure, success, expensive clothes, and gourmet food”—and the emptiness worsens.

In high school and university, trusting students “learn” that there is no truth, there are no absolutes, no ultimate answers, everything is relative—so what is the point of anything? The gate to eternal life is too narrow for their taste (“O taste and see that the Lord is good” [Ps 34:8] seems mystical, foolish), so they join the multitudes on the broad road “that leadeth to destruction” (Mt 7:13-14). Life becomes a vain pursuit of fleshly enjoyment for the moment—and many churches, tragically, pander to this deadly obsession with pleasure and fun. They offer shallow, unchallenging teaching to attract the young “to Christ.”

There are few (even among Christians) who give much thought or serious preparation to eternity—yes, *eternity*. Whatever work of the Holy Spirit (convincing and convicting “of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment” - Jn 16:8) has taken root in the heart is stifled by

the “care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches” (Mt 13:22). And the older one gets (with little exception), the slipperier the slope that slides into *death*.

There are, however, many unsaved people who cannot escape the sober realization that this brief life ends all too soon—and who fear what lies beyond. They crave sound answers to serious questions that haunt them in moments of reflection. It’s not more trivia that fills daily life that they seek, but the ultimate answers to life’s most important questions. It is to these persons that Peter tells us we must be ready *always* to give a “reason” for the hope we have in Christ (1 Pt 3:15). The Lord has led me to many such persons, often the one sitting next to me on an airplane, or a taxi driver, or . . . who knows?

Most people who have thought seriously about life and death know that God exists. For those in doubt, we can prove God’s existence quickly (see *TBC*, Aug ’02). Most people have no real hope of heaven, so would prefer to believe that death is the end. That delusion is easily dispelled. We can prove that we are non-physical beings who continue into eternity even after the physical body we lived in is laid in the grave (see *TBC*, Aug ’02). This fact leads to serious consequences that must be faced in this life. To wait until after death is obviously too late, for “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment . . .” (Heb 9:27).

For those who recognize that the grave doesn’t end one’s existence, Satan has other lies such as spirit survival and reincarnation—again easily refuted (see *TBC*, Sep ’98). It is the thought of judgment and *eternal* punishment that most non-Christians (and even many who claim to be Christians) find most difficult to accept. And closely related is the troubling question of why a good God would allow sin and suffering.

Right here we are forced to disagree with Calvinism’s claim that everything that happens—every tragedy and wickedness—is exactly what God willed from eternity past. That belief would seem to justify the atheist’s complaint: “If your ‘God’ can’t prevent all suffering and evil, he is too weak to be God; and if he can and doesn’t, he is a monster unworthy of our trust.”

Of course, the simple answer is that God is not the cause of evil. Man is. Yes, but God *allows* evil. Is that any better than causing it? Obviously, there is a huge difference. Only one explanation of the horrible state of this world rings true to conscience and is declared in the Bible (and here again we find ourselves in conflict with our Calvinist friends). God gave man a free will

so that we could willingly and with understanding love Him and each other and not be brutes ruled by instinct; or worse, mere puppets with God pulling the strings.

Thus, the only way to eliminate evil from this world would be to annihilate the human race because, as Jesus said, “Out of the heart [of man] proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries . . .” (Mt 15:19). The damning truth that “the heart [my heart, your heart] is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9) is not easy to face. We love to blame everyone else—a trait psychology encourages by teaching that it is never *my* fault but the fault of parents, society, circumstances, “tough breaks,” etc. The first step toward a cure is to take the blame ourselves and willingly face the consequences.

So man is a sinner, and sin must be punished. What the Bible declares makes sense and every conscience knows it: whatever the penalty prescribed by the law, it must be paid. If God did not punish sin, He would be condoning it. A major problem in our society today is that lack of punishment results in revolving doors on prisons, marriage vows that have become meaningless and are broken with scarcely a twinge of guilt or remorse, no dread of consequences, and little sympathy for others because consciences have been “seared with a hot iron” (1 Tm 4:2). This is the world *man* has made. It is not the world God created.

Man was created in the image of God to reflect the very character of God in every thought, word, and deed. But he was to do so knowingly and willingly, not as a robot or wind-up toy. He had to have a free will so that he could voluntarily and in love fulfill God’s purpose for his existence.

Adam and Eve willfully chose to disobey God, thereby destroying themselves as God had made them. Sin is coming “short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). No amount of good deeds in the future could pay for sinning in the past. By very definition of who He is, God could not tolerate rebellion in His universe. He immediately cast Adam and Eve out of the idyllic paradise He had created for them—but not without graciously and lovingly offering them an alternative. They and their descendants could be reconciled to Him, on His terms, of course—or they could suffer eternal separation, not just from the Garden but from His holy presence. The choice was theirs and their descendants’ to make.

Having been created for fellowship with God who

had given them life and who alone could sustain it, separation from Him was, of course, the sentence of death. God had made that clear from the beginning. He had given Adam and Eve the easiest command possible—out of the hundreds (and perhaps thousands) of trees in the garden, they were to abstain from eating the fruit of just one. That’s all, only one! And God clearly warned, “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gn 2:17). Death was not in the fruit but in the disobedience.

One can’t even play a game without rules. Surely it is only reasonable that God should have rules in His universe. Without physical laws, the universe (if it could even exist) would be unimaginable chaos. That man is a moral being requires moral rules, and to allow them to be broken without punishment would bring moral chaos. We see this on a small scale in families where well-meaning but foolishly indulgent parents, by not punishing their children consistently each time they break the rules, train them to be rebels. The child quickly learns that it can have its own way and soon ruins life for everyone.

Life itself teaches us how foolish it is to ask why there should be punishment for sin. Every person understands why this must be, whether they admit it or not. And right here we encounter a serious roadblock to faith for many people. Unquestionably, the Bible teaches that the punishment for sin is *eternal*. Jesus clearly warned of hell and referred to “hell . . . fire that *never* shall be quenched” (Mk 9:45).

“Why?” comes the inevitable complaint. “*Why* should the punishment for sin be *eternal*? That seems too harsh! Why can’t God punish us for varying lengths of time depending upon each one’s sins, and then forgive us? Why would God sentence anyone, even a Hitler, to *eternal* punishment? Why must the lake of fire be *eternal*?” The answer is found in who God is and in the fact that “God created man in his own image” (Gn 1:27). Let us consider carefully what that means.

The penalty for sin is death. Obviously, death separates from life—but life comes from God, so death separates from Him, the Life-Giver. Thus, there is no cure for death except for the sinner to become pure and holy in God’s sight in order to be reconciled to Him. Contrary to the Roman