

# PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

## Church Association Tract 003

I. Prayers for the dead are intimately connected with the doctrine of Purgatory; for if in Heaven it is difficult to see what need a soul can have for our prayers; if in Hell they can be of no use. It is accordingly maintained by Dr. Littledale “that even the best and holiest men leave this world bearing the stains of sin and error which must be cleansed *somewhere* before they can be fitted for heaven.” This is Purgatory.

II. Our Church declares Purgatory to be a “fond thing vainly invented and founded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.” Purgatory is founded on a virtual denial of the sufficiency of the atonement, and of the efficacy of “the blood of Christ which cleanseth from all sin;” and it leads directly to the Romish doctrine of the Mass which the Church denounces as “a blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit.”

III. Prayers for the dead are *unscriptural*.

*a.* The word of God is our perfect rule of faith and practice. All will worship is forbidden; so is teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. To a thousand specious arguments in favour of the practice we have one all-conclusive answer:— *It is not warranted by Scripture.*

*b.* No patriarch, prophet, apostle, or saint mentioned in Scripture ever offered up a prayer for the dead. To say that they did so is a mere assertion. We challenge proof. Prayer for the dead is nowhere enjoined or suggested. The Bible contains 66 books written by some 30 different men on every possible religious subject, but it contains not one single sentence in favour of praying for the dead.

IV. Prayers for the dead are contrary to the direct teaching of the New Testament.

*a.* The soul of Lazarus went straight to Abraham’s bosom, where he was comforted; the soul of the rich man to hell where he was tormented. The soul of the penitent thief went straight to Paradise with Christ.

*b.* St. Paul teaches that to *be absent from the body* is not to be in Purgatory or any place requiring our prayers, but *present with the Lord*: to depart is to be *with Christ, to die is, not suffering hereafter, but gain.*

*c.* St. John declares that those who die in the Lord rest and are blessed. But they are neither blest nor do they rest if, as Dr. Littledale says, they are suffering temporary punishment after death.

V. Prayers for the dead are rejected by our Prayer Book.

*a.* In the semi-reformed Book of 1549 the practice was taught, in that of 1552 it was rejected. Not only was the prayer *struck out* of that for “the whole state of Christ’s Church,” but the words “*militant here on earth*” were added to the title; thus excluding prayers for the dead, and instead thereof we thank God for all those departed this life in his faith and fear.

*b.* The Burial Service in 1549 contained the following:—

“Grant unto this thy servant that the sins which he hath committed in this world be not imputed to him, but that he, escaping the gates of hell and pains of eternal darkness, may ever dwell in the regions of light!”

In 1552 this was *struck out*, and the souls of the faithful are declared to be “with the Lord *in joy and felicity*.” Thanks are therefore offered up for the deliverance of our brother from the miseries of this world, and we pray that God would hasten his kingdom so that we, *with* (not *and*) all those who are departed in the true faith of his holy name may have our perfect consummation and bliss both in body and soul in his glorious kingdom. *We pray for ourselves, we give thanks for the dead.*

#### VI. Prayers for the dead are condemned by the Homilies:

“Now to entreat of that question, Whether we ought to pray for them that are departed out of this world or no? Wherein, if we will cleave only unto the word of God, then must we needs grant, that we have no commandment so to do. For the Scripture doth acknowledge *but two places after this life*: the one proper to the elect and blessed of God, the other to the reprobate and damned souls; as may be well gathered by the parable of Lazarus and the rich man:

Let these and such other places be sufficient to take away the gross error of purgatory out of our heads; neither let us dream any more, that the souls of the dead are anything at all holpen by our prayers: but, as the Scripture teacheth us, let us think that *the soul of man, passing out of the body, goeth straightways either to heaven, or else to hell, whereof the one needeth no prayer, and the other is without redemption.*”

Here the Church teaches:—

1. “There are but two places after this life.”
2. The dead are not at all holpen by our prayers.
3. “The soul goes straight either to heaven or hell.”
4. “In heaven the soul needs no prayers; in hell it is without redemption.”

#### VII. Prayers for the dead are condemned by the Reformers.

Jewell.—“Praying for the dead is superstitious and without warrant of God’s word.” (Vol. ii. P. 743. P. S.)

Whitgift in answer to Cartwright.—“We pray not for our brother and others that be departed in the true faith, *but we pray for ourselves*, that we may have our perfect consummation, &c. as we are sure those shall who die in his true faith. *It is a manifest untruth to maintain that we pray for the dead.*” (Vol. iii. p. 364. P. S.)

Bp. Cooper.—“The offering for the dead in the ancient Church was no more than an offering or thanksgiving for their salvation.” (p. 96. P. S.)

Abp. Usher.—“Prayer is abused when we pray for such things as God hath made no promise of, *as when men pray for souls departed.*” (p. 277.)

#### VIII. Supposed arguments in favour of prayers for the dead.

1. St Paul prayed for Onesiphorus. (2 Tim. i. 18.) The inference being, it is said, that he was dead.

*Ans.* This inference is entirely gratuitous. He may have been absent from his family. This is too weak a foundation for a doctrine which virtually contravenes the whole tenor of Scripture.

2. Judas Maccabæus offered a sacrifice for the souls of some idolators who fell in battle, and declared it was a wholesome thought to pray for the dead.

*Ans.* What then? Jeroboam set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan for the people to worship. Are we to follow his example? Yet he had as much authority for the one Judas Maccabæus for the other.

3. The early Christians prayed for the dead.

*Ans.* Very likely. Many of them were converts from Paganism, and so naturally enough corrupted the purity of the Gospel with notions derived from their former state. They had been in the habit of offering sacrifices for their dead, and clung to a notion so congenial to corrupt human nature. Besides, we know that the mystery of iniquity began to work in the Apostles' days. There is reason however to believe that many of them only intended a sacrifice of thanksgiving, for they offered for patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and even for the Virgin Mary herself.

4. The Communion of Saints implies prayers for the dead.

*Ans.* It implies nothing of the sort, but only the fellowship which the whole family of Christ have in him. (1 John i. 3; Heb. xii. 22, 23.)

Protestant Churchmen! Prayers for the dead are connected with some of the worst errors of Rome. Already the "Holy sacrifice" is offered by the Ritualists for the souls of the departed, and declared to be propitiatory for the sins of the living and the dead. A door is thus thrown open to the worst abuses of the Mass; and the solemn warning of St. Peter is needed against those false teachers, "who through covetousness *with feigned words* make merchandise" of the souls of men. (2 Pet. ii. 3.) The love of filthy lucre and sacerdotal power is at the bottom of this doctrine; well did Cranmer say: "they have *devised* a purgatory to torment souls after this life; and oblation of masses said by the priests to deliver them."

Prayer for the dead is one of the natural instincts of corrupt human nature. For man feels that he is not fit for the presence of God, and yet he shrinks from the dreadful idea of being banished for ever to endless misery. The notion, therefore, that there is a middle place, or state, where the dead can be helped by the suffrages of the living, is readily embraced. The wish is father to the thought, and hence its wide and ready acceptance by the unconverted. The Gospel, however, knows nothing of it. Washed in the blood of Christ by a living faith; clothed with the imputed robe of His spotless righteousness, and sanctified by His Holy Spirit, the believer is ensured of an immediate entrance into a blissful immortality.