

Ascension. THAT we saw him go, that we have heard from him since, and that he has been seen in that other land, *the sole evidence we ever have of a friend's existence on another continent.* Such is the evidence we have of Christ. The crucifixion was public, the burial was public, the appearances after the resurrection were public, and as public as all the rest was the ascension: "as they were looking, He was taken up" (Acts i. 9). While all eyes were calmly, attentively, lovingly turned towards Him as He speaks, He was slowly carried up into Heaven. No eyes had seen Enoch go; Elijah went up in a flash—seen but by one: the calm, quiet convincing gaze of eleven sober men watched the Lord upward. They saw Him go. No fact could be more simple or sober or real. As the Body had been physically handled in the upper room, so it went up, *physically visible*, until a cloud came between; as literal as the cloud, so literal was the body; and up to the moment that He disappeared behind the cloud, it was the actual Jesus who had talked and walked and eaten with them. He had shown His power over the sea by walking on it, over the earth by raising the dead out of it, over Hades by leaving His own grave, and now over the air by rising up to God through it. "Who maketh the clouds His chariot; who walketh upon the wings of the wind" (Ps. civ. 3).

## THE ASCENSION

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## PURGATORY

**Purging.** IT is a supreme peculiarity of our Lord's love to His own that it can never stop short of the perfection of the person loved. "As many as I love, I chasten" (Rev. iii. 19). "He chastens us for our profit, *that we may become partakers of His holiness*" (Heb. xii. 10). His holiness is perfection; so that our discipline, however drastic or prolonged, is never a proof of His enmity, but of His love; and is never a sign—either now, or at the Judgment Seat—of a disciple's ultimate destruction, but of his ultimate perfection. Where others show their love by indulgence, Christ shows His by chastisement. "Every branch that beareth fruit, He PURGETH it" (John xv. 2).

**Purgatory.** The Roman doctrine of Purgatory would have been impossible had the Church always held and taught the full Scripture truth of a believer's purging. Only twice has the Roman doctrine been officially defined. "If such as be truly penitent die in God's favour before they have satisfied for their sins of commission and omission by worthy fruits of penance"—i.e., assisted their own atonement—"their souls are purged after death with purgatorial punishments" (Council of Ferrara); "and the souls delivered there are assisted by the suffrages [prayers and devotions] of the Faithful, and especially by the most acceptable sacrifice of the Mass" (Council of Trent).

Departure. did? The Lord had risen; the tomb was empty; He had talked and eaten with more than five hundred people; He had been handled by reverent unbelievers:—how then did He leave the earth? If He left it by death,—the whole resurrection thus becoming meaningless,—if He wasted a way with disease, fell once again into the grave, and was laid to rest by those who have since died for love of Him, how is it that there is not even the whisper of a tradition how and where He died? We have the tomb of Abraham, in Hebron; of Mohammed, in Medina; of Napoleon, in Paris; where is the tomb of Jesus? Again, if His grave, like that of Moses, was dug by God, in a sepulchre never seen by human eyes, and unknown to this day, how is it God has never told us so, as He did of the burial of Moses? Has God let millions of the holiest lives ever since build themselves on a lie, and never broken the silence? Again, is it conceivable that our Lord, the soul of purity and honor, allowed Himself during a storm—as some unbelievers suppose—to seem to disappear, in a kind of stare ascension, and then carefully kept up the deception until His death? Could you believe that? As risen from the dead, and therefore deathless and immortal, no other mode of leaving the world can be imagined than ascension. The philosopher who tells of another world, and then falls into the grave, leaves us unconvinced: but when Christ tells us of another world, and then *departs into it*, and is seen there (Acts vii. 55), and communicates with men *from it* (Rev. ii., iii.), we

know we are not in the region of conjecture, but of fact; and in the presence of the only explanation which the facts will bear.

The ascension, moreover, is a section foretold. Our Lord had plainly foretold it. "What then if ye should behold the Son of Man ascending where He was before?" (John vi. 62). "Yet a little while I am with you, and I go unto Him that sent Me. Ye shall seek Me"—as the prophet's disciples sought Elijah—"and shall not find Me: and where I am, ye cannot come" (John vii. 33). Why not? Peter answers: "Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts iii. 21). Why 'must'? Because it needs be that Scriptures be fulfilled. "Thou hast ascended on high,"—so runs a passage which the Holy Spirit applies to Christ (Eph. iv. 7); "Thou hast descended, Paul says, (Ps. lxxviii. 18): for 'He that descended, Paul says, 'is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens'" (Eph. iv. 10); "who is on the right hand of God, having gone into heaven" (I Pet. iii. 22); "a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God" (Heb. iv. 14). Christ has moved up from off this earthly globe, and passed into the real, sure, abiding portion of the universe; we are divided from that great world *only by a cloud*; up to the edge of the cloud human eyes followed the Lord, now as literally and as actually on the other side as ever He was on this; and how thin that cloud wears at times, and how quickly and suddenly we too may step behind it!

atonings sufferings but the sufferings of Calvary: works with a view to salvation are sinful and deadly. "Not of works, that no man should glory" (Eph. ii. 9).

Now we turn to the Scripture truth. God has provided two purgings—one by blood, and one by discipline: and the purging by blood must precede the purging by discipline. "According to the law, all things are purged by blood" (Heb. ix. 22): "how much more shall the blood of Christ purge your conscience from dead works"—the deadly efforts of self-righteousness—"to serve the living God" (Heb. ix. 14). For Christ has affected the essential and fundamental purging once for all: "who when He had purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. i. 3): and this purging is the sole basis, and predisposing cause, of all subsequent purging. For only a saved soul can be purged by chastisement. No amount or degree of suffering can improve into life a soul dead in trespasses and sins, any more than dead wood can be made to grow fruit by pruning: chastisement cannot purge him: he can be purged, but not by chastisement: and God is not habitually chastening the wicked at all. For "if ye are without chastening, whereby all [believers] have been made partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons" (Heb. xii. 8). Corrective sufferings are only granted and effective to those already purged by the sacrificial sufferings of Calvary.

The second purging is discipline. "Every branch that beareth fruit"—i.e., living wood, set in the living Vine—"He purgeth it" (John xv. 2). A soul which

**Errors of Purgatory.** The manifest errors here—apart from such fearful accretions as the sale of indulgences, or the efficacy of the Mass—are mainly three. (1) The doctrine of Purgatory locates the purging in Hades: Scripture locates it in this life, and at the Judgment Seat after resurrection, but never in Hades. Paradise, for all believers, is the 'very far better' of the immediate presence of Christ. (2) No power of pope or priest, and no prayers of fellow-believers, can in the slightest degree modify the judgments due to any man, believer or unbeliever, after he has once passed into the other world. "It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this cometh JUDGMENT" (Heb. ix. 27). Paul, most remarkably, does pray for a believer "that he may receive mercy of the Lord in that day" (2 Tim. i. 18): but Onesiphorus was still alive; and there was still room for Paul's prayer to become operative in his life. Prayer for the dead is unknown in the Scriptures. This cuts away the root of all abominations (indulgences, etc.) that have grown around the Roman doctrine. (3) But the vital error lies in confusing discipline with salvation. Chastisement is necessary and salutary: it is inflicted by God in this life upon all believers without exception (Heb. xii. 8): it may, in extreme cases, be fearful bodily disease (Ex. xv. 26), or even be mortal (I Cor. xi. 30): since death produces no magical change, converting the sinning into the sinless, and since much less can—it cancels unrepented offences during discipleship, chastisement may be equally necessary and salutary at the Judgment Seat:—but disciplinary suffering has no connection whatever with eternal life. There are no

is born again, yet still having 'the flesh' in him, can have his still fallible character corrected and elevated and cleansed by chastisement. Nor need this purging end with life. "Some of the oldest Roman divines taught that all the remains of sin in God's children are quite abolished by final grace at the very instant of their dissolution; so that the stain of the least sin is not left behind to be carried into the other world" (Archbishop Usher's *Answer to a Jesuit*, p. 165). This ancient Roman doctrine is as unscriptural as the later Roman doctrine of Purgatory. For the believer who falls asleep unwatchful, wakes unwatchful—the servant who dies slothful, appears before the Judgment Seat slothful: their last look on this world is, morally, their first look on the next: they *will* be purged, but they are *not* purged: there is no magic in death, and no opportunity in Hades to correct a faulty discipleship: *and the coming millennial day of Justice, dominated by the Judgment Seat, has for its essential characteristic the recoil of works in judicial retribution.* "For he that doeth wrong"—the context is addressed solely to believers—"SHALL RECEIVE AGAIN FOR THE WRONG THAT HE HATH DONE: and there is no respect of persons" (Col. iii. 25). But it is Divine Love that will not rest until all we who believe are "become partakers of His holiness": no disciple ever involves our destruction; it effects, sooner or later, our perfection.

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What then is the deep significance of the ascension? The High Priest, on entering the Holy of holies, was required to enter with blood, and to deposit it in the Sanctuary, so covering Israel's approach to God. Now "a spirit," Jesus says of Himself, "hath not flesh and bones"—the blood is not in His resurrection body—"as ye see Me have" (Luke xxiv. 39). As the Priest entered with the blood, in a bowl, separate from himself, so God "brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep with the blood of His own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place" (Heb. ix. 12). That blood, in the immediate presence of God, is the silent witness of a slaughter for sin,—a capital punishment endured,—a law met and satisfied,—a wrath righteously quenched: the sinner can now penetrate to the very presence of God because he follows in the wake of the blood. Heb. vii. 25. Any man, guilty of any sin (save one), can now plead all the efficacy of the blood, and the plea has behind it the whole advocacy of Christ. "If any man sin, we have an ADVOCATE with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and He is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, BUT ALSO FOR THE WHOLE WORLD" (1 John ii. 1).

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