

“THE CONSUMING FIRE”:  
A BRIEF ILLUSTRATION OF PURGATORY

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Catholics believe that before one enters the presence of God, he endures a state of fiery purification, called “purgatory.” The idea has deep roots in the biblical tradition.

In the episode where Isaiah enters the presence of Yahweh, fire imagery is pervasive (Isa. 6). The entire temple is full of smoke (6:4); encircling the throne are celestial beings known as “Seraphim,” literally, “burning ones” (6:2). Isaiah is overwhelmed in the midst of this absolute, fiery sanctity, and fears his own destruction:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.” (6:5)

As the prophet elsewhere notes, only absolute sanctity can survive the fiery presence of God:

The sinners in Zion are terrified;  
trembling grips the godless:  
“Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?  
Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?”

He who walks righteously  
and speaks what is right  
who rejects gain from extortion  
and keeps his hand from accepting bribes,  
who stops his ears against plots of murder  
and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil  
...  
Your eyes will see the king in his beauty. . . . (Isa. 33:14-15,17)

Isaiah lacks this very sanctity, and stands in need of a purification. Ironically, the very fire threatening him (enlivening a live coal) prepares him to dwell in its midst:

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he

touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” (Is 6:6-7)

### *Purgatory*

Eventually, all Christians will also encounter the fiery presence of God. In this light, the experience of Isaiah is paradigmatic; like the prophet, we are imperfect beings, unprepared to live in the midst of that absolute sanctity. Ellen White said that “sanctification is the work of a lifetime,” but few complete that process in this life. Even at the end of our lives, we continue to struggle with our faults, our tempers, our selfishness, and our lusts; we fail frequently. We need a final transformation—a purification from every vestige of sin. That purification, wrought by the very fires of heaven, is what Catholics term “purgatory.” Approaching the fiery presence of God, Christians will be sanctified by the same fire, just as Isaiah was.

All these essential facts of purgatory are latent in Adventist thought. Again, Adventists recognize that individuals die with weaknesses and deformities in character that have not been completely corrected in this life. Of course, no Adventist believes the saints will rise with these deformed characters. They implicitly assume that a transformation will occur, perhaps on the day of the resurrection, which will complete the work of “sanctification” left unfinished in this life.

It also seems entirely obvious that any final transformation of the soul should be a “painful” process, even if instantaneous. We are profoundly attached to sin; we do not want to tear ourselves from it. We find ourselves pacing around at times, trying to resist certain temptations (e.g., to be angry, to lust). Sanctification is difficult, and we often feel that difficulty intensely. Should our final and decisive break with every vestige of sin be any less difficult? The idea that the final purification is a “suffering” experience is more than reasonable: it is obvious. Being touched on the lips with a live coal was an uncomfortable, but necessary, experience for Isaiah.

Now, the only remaining question is: when does this purification occur? If the soul enters the presence of God at death, as Catholics believe, then it will need to receive final purification then (i.e., in the intermediate state).