

32. GREGORY THE GREAT

In 540, a child was born in one of the many beautiful houses of Rome. His parents and relatives were wealthy, prominent Roman citizens. The new parents gave their little son the name *Gregory*. Little Gregory grew well and flourished. His parents let him study because they could easily afford it. Gregory was a good student because the Lord had blessed him with an intelligent mind.

When he was thirty-one, he became the prefect of Rome. This appointment gave him a prominent position in the city's government. After the death of his father, Gregory inherited all his properties. Now he was wealthy. But Gregory was not interested in riches. He used his money to build monasteries.

He also built one in Rome and became a monk in his own monastery!

He wanted to spend the rest of his life in peace and solitude. But God's counsel had determined otherwise. The Christian church in Rome chose him as a deacon. Instead of getting rest, Gregory

became very busy because there were many poor in that church.

On top of that, the monks chose him to be the abbot in his monastery. So now he must help provide for the poor *and* regulate and manage everything in the monastery!

At the time, a terrible pestilence was raging through Rome. Hundreds of people died of that dreadful sickness. As abbot, Gregory organised for his monks to walk in procession through the city to help fight that terrible sickness. When the pandemic eventually passed, the bishops chose Gregory as pope in 590 AD. But he did not want that at all! He just wanted a life of peace and quiet. He fled, but the people discovered his hiding place and brought him back to Rome in a procession. They compelled him to accept his nomination as pope. Finally, Gregory yielded to the people's wish and accepted that high office. Now he was the head of the entire church!

GREGORY AS POPE

Gregory first made peace with the Lombards so they would no longer destroy the churches and monasteries. He worked hard his entire life, including while he was a pope. He took rigorous action against the monks who lived a life of wickedness. They had to give up their sins; if they didn't, he expelled them from the monasteries.

He had the destroyed church buildings rebuilt. He appointed new bishops throughout the empire.

As the singing in the churches was generally awful, he established many singing schools to improve that. Gregory even composed several hymns, which the priests sang.

He sent monks out as missionaries to distant lands where the pagans lived so that they would bring Christianity there. It's not surprising that the people soon started calling him "Gregory the Great". The people honoured and highly respected him. The bishops obeyed him and subjected themselves to his leadership.



Saint Gregory the Great 540-604
<https://hotcore.info>

They did as he commanded. His will was law! God had given him many talents. In many ways, he excelled above others. Through his lifestyle, he set a good example.

And yet . . .

Gregory did *not* deserve the surname "the Great" because he shamefully *abused* the wisdom God had given him. Gregory did do many *good* things, but even more *wrong* things.

He led the church further down the wrong path. Gregory promoted the worship of saints and the revering of relics as much as possible.

He encouraged the bishops to bring images into the church.

He enforced false doctrine by changing the Lord's Supper into the 'sacrifice of the mass'. (See chap. 28)

God's Word teaches us that *grace* saves the sinner. Man is *dead* in sin and trespass, and only the almighty power of God can change him from dead to alive. Gregory taught:

"No, man is not *dead* but *sick*!"

God's Word teaches us that man cannot earn anything. God says:

"By grace, you are saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God."

But Gregory said:

"No, man is still able to merit something."

In chapter 25, we learnt about the Semi-Pelagians; read that part again. Well, Pope Gregory was the man who implemented that Semi-Pelagian heresy into the church.

THE LIE OF PURGATORY

Gregory also introduced a completely different heresy. He brought the doctrine of *purgatory* into the church.

Purgatory? What's that? We don't read anything about purgatory in the Bible!

And yet, Pope Gregory brought that particular heresy into the church.

The word "purgatory" really means "cleansing fire". To this day, we still find that doctrine of purgatory in the Roman Catholic Church.

Gregory said:

"In purgatory, the souls of the believers are purified from the last sins they committed. When

the unbelievers die, they go straight to hell, but the believers do *not* go straight to heaven. Oh no! Their souls first go to a place between heaven and hell. There they are purified and cleansed from their past sins. There the last sins are burned away."

Perhaps you ask:

"How long do those souls have to stay in purgatory?"

The Roman Catholic Church does not answer that question. But they say: "The people still alive on earth can *help* the souls in purgatory."

If a mother of a large family has died, the children still alive must pray much for their deceased mother.

That helps!

And they must do many good works!

That helps, too!

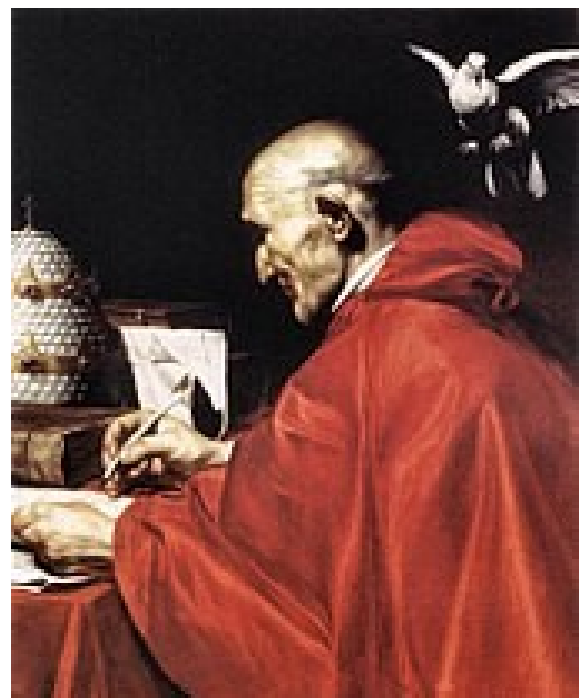
And they must give many gifts to the poor.

That helps still more!

And they must give money or their possessions to the church.

That helps most of all!

The doctrine of purgatory became a gold mine for the Roman Catholic Church. Through it, the Roman Catholic Church received many gifts: treasures of money and properties. All those gifts supposedly shortened the time the deceased person had to spend in purgatory.



Saint Gregory the Great. Painted by José de Ribera

Is it any wonder that, wherever possible, the children gave everything to the church to deliver their beloved mother from the flames of purgatory?

Is it any wonder that a farmer gave his entire farm to the church to deliver his beloved wife out of purgatory?

Is it any wonder that a mother gave her house, estate, or all her properties to the church to get her beloved husband or child out of purgatory?

But does that happen? Does it help? Of course not! The doctrine of purgatory is a *doctrine of lies*! Regrettably, the people also believed that big lie. Again, God's Word does not speak about purgatory. The Lord Jesus has *fully* paid the debt for *all* His Own through His painful suffering and death. He is not *half* a Saviour but a *complete* and *perfect* Saviour. When God's people die, they *immediately* go to heaven.

When the Lord Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, He said that the rich man opened his eyes in hell, being in torment, and Lazarus was carried into Abraham's bosom. So Lazarus did not first go to purgatory, but his soul entered glory immediately.

The Roman Catholics may say: "That was only a parable!"

So, I shall mention another instance from God's Word, which is not a parable. The Lord Jesus said to the thief on the cross:

"*Today* you will be with Me in Paradise."

Even that thief did not first have to go to purgatory for a while, but immediately after his death, he was allowed to enter eternal bliss. Besides, praying for the dead is forbidden in God's Word. We may and must pray for the living, but there is no point praying for the dead because they have already reached their eternal destination. As the tree falls, so shall it lie forever. It is not possible to repent when you are in the grave. All this clearly shows that the doctrine of purgatory is against the Bible's teaching.

Pope Gregory helped lead the church of God to destruction. Gregory also wrote books full of so-called miracle stories. Supposedly, relics or images of saints performed those miracles. From far and

wide, people flocked to where they kept those relics or images. Gregory caused the pilgrimages to those places to increase.

That's why I said that though the Roman Catholic Church gave Gregory the surname: "the Great", he definitely did *not* deserve that surname! True, he worked hard during the years he was pope. He made peace with the Lombards. He rebuilt destroyed church buildings. He put an end to much wickedness among the monks.

He sent missionaries to the pagans. These were all good things.

But by promoting heresies, he *destroyed* God's church internally. Under his leadership, that straying church strayed further away from the truth. Yes, God still had His people in that depraved church. There have always been children of God. Also then! For *their* sake, the Lord used Gregory to preserve the church from total destruction, but he was only an instrument in the hand of the Lord.

We may compare him with scaffolding. Scaffolding is necessary and indispensable when building a church or house. However, the builder removes and burns the scaffolding when the building is complete. Although the scaffolding stands close to a building, it only stands *next* to it. It is not part of the building itself. That's why Gregory's story is a solemn warning, also for us.

What are we - living stones or *scaffolding*?



Wooden Scaffolding.

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QUESTIONS

1. How was Gregory's youth spent? What government position did he have?
2. What type of life did Gregory prefer?
3. How did he become a pope?
4. List some of his achievements as a leader.
5. List some of the practices Gregory made into official rulings for the church.
6. How did Gregory revive the error of the Semi-Pelagians?
7. Explain the new heresy introduced by Gregory.
8. According to Gregory, how can those still living on earth assist the dead?
9. How did this doctrine add to the earthly riches of the church?
10. How did this heresy undermine the work of the Lord Jesus?
11. Prove this error to be wrong based on God's Word.
12. Why is it wrong to pray for the dead?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read the story of the death of David's young child (2 Samuel 12). What did David do while the child was alive? What did he do after the child's death? Did he continue to pray for the child? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that Gregory intended to make the church wealthy through the doctrine of purgatory? Explain your answer.

REVIEW

Are the following statements true or false? If the statement is false, make it true.

1. Some of the early Christians became hermits to flee persecution.
2. Because of our deep fall through Adam, we have inherited a twofold death: temporal and eternal.
3. Arius denied original sin.
4. The Lord used Anthony to combat Gregory's errors.
5. Some of the hermits whipped their bodies to drive out sin.

6. The church instituted a holy day to remember Anthony when they canonised him.
7. Anthony was one early hermit who failed to provide for his material needs.
8. A convent is a monastery for men whose inhabitants are called monks.
9. Some monks used their talents to copy the Bible and other good books.
10. The emperor chose the pope.
11. The order of the church hierarchy is as follows: pope, archbishop, bishop, clergyman, layman.
12. God builds His church on Peter, the Rock.
13. Attila was the strong leader of the Vandals.
14. Gregory revived Semi-Pelagian errors by declaring man to be sick rather than dead in sin.
15. A second Semi-Pelagian error advanced by Gregory was that man could not earn salvation by his own merits.
16. Roman Catholics believe that purgatory is an intermediate place where souls are purified before going to heaven.
17. According to the Roman Catholic Church, the prayers of the living can help the dead.
18. One cannot use the mass to help the dead.
19. Gregory opposed the use of hymns in public worship services.
20. Gregory was concerned about the morality of the monks and urged them to give up their wickedness.

RESEARCH TOPICS:

1. Research the organisation of the Roman Catholic Church today. What is a diocese? What positions are in the church hierarchy today?
2. What is the College of Cardinals? How is a pope chosen these days?
3. Report on Vatican City as it is today. Do not forget to include the following considerations: Does Italy govern the area, or is it independent? What does the site of the Vatican include? How large is it?