

## The Fire of Purgation in Gregory of Nyssa's *De anima et resurrectione*

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*(<http://www.apologistascaticos.com.br/index.php/patristica/estudos-patristicos/745-o-fogo-de-purgacao-na-obra-de-anima-et-resurrectione-de-sao-gregorio-de-nissa>).*

### Introduction

Fire has had different functions in Christian eschatology. While final destruction is the fate of the unsaved according to Edward William Fudge in his book *Fire that Consumes*<sup>1</sup>, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that eternal punishment awaits those who die in a state of mortal sin<sup>2</sup>. In either case, fire is the main agent that consumes the damned or inflicts eternal punishment on them. Fire also plays an important role in purifying the soul according to the Catechism's teachings on purgatory where all who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, undergo purification before they enter the joy of heaven. "The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire."<sup>3</sup> Long before the Fathers of the Councils of Florence (1414-1418 A.D.) and Trent (1545-1563 A.D.) promulgated the doctrine of purgatory, Gregory of Nyssa (335-394 A.D.) and other theologians<sup>4</sup> espoused the teaching of universal salvation in which fire has a central function. The objective of this paper is to explain the notion of fire and its role in cleansing the soul as Gregory of Nyssa propounds in his *De anima et resurrectione* or "On the Soul and the Resurrection."<sup>5</sup>

This work begins by exploring the notion of fire as an agent of purification in the afterlife in Gregory's *De anima et resurrectione*. Next, a closer investigation of the fire of purgation will shed light on the biblical foundation upon which Gregory relied to expound his teachings. Lastly, this paper will argue that fire is a metaphor for God.

## 1. The Fire of Purgation

The death of Basil the Great<sup>6</sup> (330- 379/380 (tel:330- 379/380) A.D.), the older brother of Gregory of Nyssa, occasioned the younger sibling to compose his famous *De anima et resurrectione*. It is a dialogue between his older sister, Macrina<sup>7</sup> (ca. 331 – ca. 379/380 A.D.), the tamer of horses<sup>8</sup>, and himself, the distraught. He presents in this theological treatise his teachings on the immortality and nature of the soul, ἀποκατάστασις<sup>9</sup> or “restoration to a perfect original state<sup>10</sup>”, and the resurrection of the body. Although this restoration is universal<sup>11</sup>, according to the Bishop of Nyssa, it is only granted to those who are purified from evil, for God, who is good by nature, does not admit any evil unto Himself.

Purgation from evil can be achieved before the person’s soul is separated from the body or afterward. Subsequent to their death, the Saints will immediately be joined to the Beautiful, for they lived a virtuous life by taming their anger and desire (passions<sup>12</sup>), viz., rejecting evil. However, not all human beings are Saints. Some, through “error of judgment as to the true Beauty” and “the growth of delusion,” will exercise their free will to choose vice rather than virtue, thus tainting their souls with evil. The soul of such a human being becomes intermingled with evil, which is not of the soul’s essence.

Death separates the created and immortal soul from the body with which she was created, but does not separate her from her bondage to passions. Therefore, a “second death<sup>13</sup>” is necessary in order for the soul to be restored to the Good. As fire tests and refines gold so too will fire purge the soul from any evil that clings to it and “cleanse [her] from the remnants that are owing to this cement of the flesh,<sup>14</sup>” and only then may “her soaring up to the Good...be swift and unimpeded, with no anguish of the body to distract her.<sup>15</sup>”

According to Gregory, fire rids the soul of the evil amassed throughout the person’s life. Evil is the product of sin, the misuse of free will and reason, both of which God has given to all rational beings. Free will and the faculty of reason separate human beings from brutes to whom “passions belong by nature.” Unfortunately, whenever a person, whom the Good created in his image and likeness, succumbs to passions, the essence of that person’s soul becomes tainted by that which does not belong to it. By the exercise of free will, that person chooses to be reduced to the state of a brute, a state lesser than the Beautiful had intended. Furthermore, death does not separate the soul from her bondage to passions and to this life. Macrina, reluctantly accepting the idea that shadowy phantoms of the departed remain close to their remains, says,

“ “If this is really so, an inordinate attachment of that particular soul to the life in the flesh is proved to have existed, causing it to be unwilling, even when expelled from the flesh, to fly clean away and to admit the complete change of its form into the impalpable; it remains near the frame even after the dissolution of the frame, and though now outside it, hovers regretfully over the place where its material is and continues to haunt it.<sup>16</sup>”

Even after the body dies and the soul departs from it, she remains in the chains of slavery. An exodus from the land of slavery to the Heavenly Jerusalem is therefore necessary. The chains of slavery, however, weigh heavily on the soul and must be cut in order for her to be free. The freeing of the soul, according to Macrina, requires a “second death.” This “second death” is the state of purgation that the sinful soul has to go through in order for her to be released from this bondage to passions. Purgation is the means by which the “soul becomes free from any emotional connection with the brute creation, there will be nothing to impede its contemplation of the Beautiful.<sup>17</sup>” As long as there exists in the soul a remnant of desire, she is restrained from being truly free. Therefore, the role of purgation is to annihilate all desires from the soul, thus cleansing her from all evil.

How does this process occur? Macrina elaborates upon her idea using two metaphors to explain the modus operandi: 1) gold refining and 2) a rope passing through a small hole. In the latter metaphor no fire is involved but the meaning of the metaphor remains unchanged: the exhaustive annihilation of evil. The former metaphor goes as follows, “Just as those who refine gold from the dross which it contains not only get this base alloy to melt in the fire, but are obliged to melt the pure gold along with the alloy, and then while this last is being consumed the gold remains...<sup>18</sup>”

To refine gold means by definition to remove any impurities that are present not in the gold but with the gold. These impurities are not of the same essence of the gold and can never be confused with it. Furthermore, the essence of gold is not to produce dross which became cemented into it. To separate the two, a smelter uses fire in a crucible. Fire is the main agent of smelting and is amply powerful to remove any and all alloy intermixed and intermingled with the gold. For this process to occur, the gold is melted along with the impurities it contains. Nonetheless, melting the gold was

never the intention of the one who is refining; it is necessary, but it is not the telos. Once the unwanted alloy is completely removed a solid piece of gold bouillon remains. How does this metaphor correspond to purgation of the soul? Macrina continues, "...so, while evil is being consumed in the purgatorial fire, the soul that is welded to this evil must inevitably be in the fire too, until the spurious material alloy is consumed and annihilated by this fire.<sup>19</sup>" The gold corresponds to the soul and the dross to the evil that is attached to her. As gold was refined, so analogously will the soul be freed from her chains of slavery to evil. The consequence of annihilation of evil means the melting of both the soul and evil that is welded to her, thus bringing suffering unto her.

Not all souls need to be purified, the souls of the Saints do not go through this purgation process; Moses is a case in point. Moreover, not all human souls will have to suffer the same amount. Suffering corresponds to the amount of evil cemented to each individual soul. "The agony will be measured by the amount of evil there is in each individual."<sup>20</sup> Macrina explains,

"For it would not be reasonable to think that the man who has remained so long as we have supposed in evil known to be forbidden, and the man who has fallen only into moderate sins, should be tortured to the same amount in the judgment upon their vicious habit; but according to the quantity of material will be the longer or shorter time that that agonizing flame will be burning; that is, as long as there is fuel to feed it."<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, she states,

“ “In the case of the man who has acquired a heavy weight of material, the consuming fire must necessarily be very searching; but where that which the fire has to feed upon has spread less far, there the penetrating fierceness of the punishment is mitigated, so far as the subject itself, in the amount of its evil, is diminished. In any and every case evil must be removed out of existence, so that, as we said above, the absolutely non-existent should cease to be at all.”<sup>22</sup>”

As long as evil persists in the soul, the fire of purgation continues to purify her, keeping her in agony until the fire eliminates all remnants of evil. The

suffering<sup>23</sup> of the soul is not the goal, whereas the annihilation of evil is because evil and good cannot co-exist. The Godhead, the only one Good by nature, attracts the soul to Himself. However, she cannot go to him as long as evil exists in her. Therefore, purification is a necessary “evil” (no pun intended).

“ “[W]e may figure to ourselves the agonized struggle of that soul which has wrapped itself up in earthly material passions, when God is drawing it, His own one, to Himself, and the foreign matter, which has somehow grown into its substance, has to be scraped from it by main force, and so occasions it that keen intolerable anguish.<sup>24</sup>”

The Christian hope underlying the treatise *De anima et resurrectione* is that God’s

“ “end is one, and one only; it is this: when the complete whole of our race shall have been perfected from the first man to the last...to offer to every one of us participation in the blessings which are in Him...But this is nothing else...but to be in God Himself.<sup>25</sup>”

The soul’s agony is not eternal but lasts as long as evil persists. “According to the amount of the ingrained wickedness of each will be computed the duration of his cure.<sup>26</sup>” Gregory does not foresee anyone who will remain in this stage of purgation for ever. For if this were the case, God could never be “all in all<sup>27</sup>” as the Apostle teaches. In describing the final resurrection, Macrina attests, “all the souls in their entire number will come out of their invisible and scattered condition into tangibility and light.<sup>28</sup>”

Punishment, therefore, is not the chief and principal aim of God, the fairest Judge par excellence. It is a consequence of being in the purgation state rather than the Heavenly Court’s verdict to penalize the soul. The fire of purgation is the medicine that cures and heals the soul permanently. “This cure consists in the cleansing of his soul, and that cannot

be achieved without an excruciating condition.<sup>29</sup>” Therefore, purgation “is not punishment chiefly and principally that the Deity, as Judge, afflicts sinners with; but He operates...only to get the good separated from the evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness.<sup>30</sup>”

## 2. Biblical Foundation

Gregory was educated in the ways of the Greeks. As a Christian, he did not, however, accept Greek philosophy and reasoning blindly<sup>31</sup>; his philosophical dialectics did not run unchecked. Rather, they submitted to the Holy Scriptures which are, for him, “...the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings.<sup>32</sup>” Furthermore, the Word of God is the guide of reason and is more trustworthy than artificial conclusions. Also, dialectical conclusions must harmonize with the inspired word, i.e., the Bible. Besides, who “could deny that truth is to be found only in that upon which the seal of scripture testimony is set?<sup>33</sup>” The Bishop of Nyssa relied on the Scriptures and inherited, as the following exposition will show, the image of fire, which he used to elucidate his eschatology.

The first time Gregory uses fire in connection with purgation and ἀποκατάστασις<sup>34</sup> or “restoration to a perfect original state<sup>35</sup>” in his treatise *De Anima et Resurrectione* is when Macrina evokes the scriptural Parable of the Wheat and Tares<sup>36</sup>. Gregory interrupts his sister who was in the midst of expounding the notion of passions and asks her to show the harmony of her teachings with the Holy Scriptures. She responds, “So, if it is necessary that something from the Gospels should be adduced in support of our view, a study of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares will not be here out of place.<sup>37</sup>” The “enemy” sows the useless with the useful food. The wise Superintendent forbids the gathering up of the useless crop lest the good dies with the bad and patiently awaits in anticipation for the land “by its native inherent power...[to] wither up the one growth and [to] render the other fruitful and abundant.<sup>38</sup>” At harvest time, He finally “commissions the fire to mark the distinction in the crops<sup>39</sup>” if the tares persist.

A master of allegorical interpretation, the virgin argues that the function of fire in the parable is to purge uncontrolled passions from the human soul. She arrives at this conclusion by interpreting the good seed to correspond to “the impulses of the soul,” and the tares to “error of judgement to the true Beauty.” Through reason and the exercise of free will, human beings have the ability to cultivate these impulses of the soul to produce virtues in them.

“Supposing, then, that our reason, which is our nature’s choicest part, holds dominion over these imported emotions...none of them will be active in the ministry of evil; fear will only generate within us obedience, and anger fortitude, and cowardice caution; and the instinct of desire will procure for us the delight that is Divine and perfect.<sup>40</sup>”

Just as tares are foreign to the land, so too are these emotions external to the soul. The Householder sows the good seeds (the wheat), and the “enemy” the bad ones (the tares). The Householder is a metaphor for God, the sower of virtuous judgment in the soul, and not of passions. According to Macrina, the Good does not implant desire and anger into the human soul. In fact, those that lead to evil rather than virtue are accretions from without, not consubstantial with the soul, and not of her essence. Because they are not inherent in the soul when the Beautiful created her in his image and likeness and because they are something different accruing in her afterwards, “there is a battle of the reason with them [desire and anger] and a struggle to rid the soul of them.<sup>41</sup>” Human beings are not doomed to lose this battle for there are those “in whom this struggle has ended in success; it was so with Moses...<sup>42</sup>” This ability to win the battle is referred to in the allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Wheat and Tares as the land’s ability to wither up the one growth and render the other fruitful abundant. In this context, Gregory explicitly identifies the land with the human heart and the land’s native power to the faculty of reason which resides in the human being. The goal, therefore, is to rid the human soul of this undesirable foreign object that became intermingled with her. This casting away can be accomplished in two different ways: 1) through taming passions and directing them to virtue, or 2) through fire which consumes all imperfections.

“If, then whether by forethought here, or by purgation hereafter, our soul becomes free from any emotional connection with the brute creation, there will be nothing to impede its contemplation of the Beautiful; for this last is essentially capable of attracting in a certain way every being that looks towards it.<sup>43</sup>”

The connection between fire that incinerates the tares, as elucidated in the parable of the Wheat and Tares, and the fire that purges the soul from her passions becomes more evident as Gregory and Macrina continue their dialogue on the soul and the resurrection. They will identify these uncontrolled passions with the evil that became intermingled with the soul. The Good cannot allow a soul tainted with evil to be united with Him. Consequently, fire purges the soul and annihilates the evil that cemented into her, analogous to separating the wheat from the tares by burning the unwanted crop, before she can soar upward to the Beautiful.

Luke 16:19-31 offers another scriptural springboard for Gregory to propound his stance on the role of fire in purgation. First, he argues that the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus cannot be understood literally since both bodies are in the tomb and their souls are disembodied. Macrina says, “it is impossible to make the framework of the narrative correspond with the truth, if we understand it literally.<sup>44</sup>” For example, the chasm or gulf existing between the Rich Man and Lazarus is not a physical chasm on earth because it “could be traversed with no difficulty by a disembodied intelligence; since intelligence can in no time be wherever it will.<sup>45</sup>” Continuing her dialectic, she favors allegorical exegesis, “we can do that only by translating each detail into an equivalent in the world of ideas.<sup>46</sup>” Interpretations of the chasm between the Rich Man and Lazarus, the bosom of Abraham, and fire and flame follows.

The chasm is not physical but rather “that which parts ideas which may not be confounded from running together.<sup>47</sup>” “This,” she opines, “is the ‘gulf;’ which is not made by the parting of the earth, but by those decisions in this life which result in a separation into opposite characters.<sup>48</sup>” The opposing characters Macrina is alluding to are “good” and “evil.” Good and evil cannot co-exist in the afterlife and therefore must remain apart. Lazarus is a metaphor for the “good,” for he is unstintedly enjoying paradise and is greatly separated from the Rich man, “evil,” whose fate was different. The Rich man has brought suffering unto himself for he, “acting freely by a voluntary impulse, deserted the lot that was unmixed with evil, drew upon himself a mixture of contraries.<sup>49</sup>”

Furthermore,



“the man who has once chosen pleasure in this life, and has not cured his inconsiderateness by repentance, places the land of the good beyond his own reach; for he has dug against himself the yawning impassable abyss of a necessity that nothing can break through.<sup>50</sup>”

The land beyond the reach of the rich man is the bosom of Abraham, the place where no evil exists and where the soul is continuously drawn into the infinite Beauty. It is where the soul enjoys measureless blessings, and “a place into which all virtuous voyagers of this life are, when they have put in from hence, brought to anchor in the waveless harbor of that gulf of blessings.<sup>51</sup>”

The fire of hell stands in direct opposition to the bosom of Abraham. While the poor man is unstintedly enjoying immeasurable blessings, the rich man is in utter agony from the flames which burn his soul and inflict him with a deep thirst for a single drop from the ocean of blessings<sup>52</sup>. The fire cleansing the soul is a prelude to the analogy of the trying of gold that Macrina will employ later in *De anima et resurrectione* as a vivid image, as shown above, to describe the purification of the soul from evil. Hell, in the mind of Gregory of Nyssa, is “a certain unseen and immaterial situation in which the soul resides.<sup>53</sup>” One of the main differences between the Rich Man and Lazarus<sup>54</sup> in Luke 16:19-31 was their attachment to this life. The Rich Man, according to Macrina, was “not freed yet from this fleshly feeling,” to which the parable alluded to when he entreated “that his kindred may be exempted from his sufferings.<sup>55</sup>” The consequence of this inordinate attachment is torment.

“When the change is made into the impalpable Unseen, not even then will it be possible for the lovers of the flesh to avoid dragging away with them under any circumstances some fleshly foulness; and thereby their torment will be intensified, their soul having been materialized by such surroundings.<sup>56</sup>”

The soul brings upon herself this agonizing state of cleansing, “For if any one becomes wholly and thoroughly carnal in thought, such an [sic] one, with every motion and energy of the soul absorbed in fleshly desires, is not parted from such attachments, even in the disembodied state.<sup>57</sup>”

Although the soul may find herself in this desert of agony, her situation is not permanent. The Rich Man’s “second death” “cleanse[s] [his soul] from the remnants that are owing to this cement;<sup>58</sup>” i.e., the attachment of the soul to these unruly passions she experienced when she was embodied in this life. Once “evil,” the attachment to desire and anger mentioned above, is annihilated, the soul’s “soaring up to the Good [is] swift and unimpeded, with no anguish of the body to distract her.<sup>59</sup>” The rich man’s fate is not permanent, but his soul will continue to burn as long as evil exists in her. Once evil is utterly annihilated and his soul is totally cleansed, the rich man will join the poor man in the bosom of Abraham, the place of restoration to the perfect original state.

A third scriptural reference to the role of fire in purifying the soul is the intense image of gold refining. Zechariah makes use of it, “I will bring the one third through the fire; I will refine them as one refines silver, and I will test them as one tests gold. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is my God.’” (Zechariah 13, 9). Although neither Gregory nor Macrina refers to this scriptural passage explicitly, the connection between purging the soul and the image of purifying gold is apparent. Isaiah employs similar images, “I will turn my hand against you, and refine your dross in the furnace, removing all your alloy,” (Isaiah 1:25), and “See, I refined you, but not like silver; I tested you in the furnace of affliction.” (Isaiah 48:10).

These scriptural images and others<sup>60</sup> lend themselves to Gregory’s use in presenting his notion of purgation; “while evil is being consumed in the purgatorial fire, the soul that is welded to this evil must inevitably be in the fire too, until the spurious material alloy is consumed and annihilated by this fire.<sup>61</sup>”

God’s juridical actions and the torment that the soul endures, as illustrated by Macrina, also have biblical foundation. Macrina invokes Luke 7:41-43 without quoting it to argue that “God’s judgment reaches to all<sup>62</sup>” and that each person must pay the debtor according to the size of the owed debt. Every one goes before the Heavenly Court. The sentence of torment that each soul has to endure corresponds to the evil attached to it. Macrina also invokes Matthew 18:21-35 to demonstrate that the soul must suffer as long as evil is attached to it. “[T]he indebted man was delivered to the tormentors until he should pay the whole debt.<sup>63</sup>”

Gregory, using his sister Macrina as his theological compass, ingeniously relies on scriptural texts to describe the fire of purgation. The New Testament parables of the Wheat and Tares and of the Rich Man and Lazarus and the Old Testament images he employed of gold testing point to the same explanation: evil, the product of the free will, must be annihilated from the soul to which it is cemented before the human being is restored body and soul to the perfect original state prepared for that person before the foundation of the world.

### 3. Fire, a Metaphor for God

The last section of this work argues that the fire of purgation in Gregory's *De anima et resurrectione* is a metaphor for God. God is the Heavenly Physician who cures and heals the sinful soul and is the liberator who frees her from her attachment to passions and the physical life. He is her Moses who leads her out of Egypt, the land of slavery, but unlike he who dies before entering the promised land, Her Savior<sup>64</sup> dies on the cross and rises after three days, ascends in body and soul to his previous dwelling place with God the Father, and now awaits her restoration to her final resting abode of blessedness which is in Him, in his glorious Father, and in the splendor of the Holy Spirit.

In his *De Infantibus Praemature Abreptis* or "On Infants' Early Deaths,"<sup>65</sup> Gregory illustrates with a metaphor that "in His consummate wisdom God can mould even evil into co-operation with good."<sup>66</sup> How is this done? The Bishop of Nyssa likens God to an artisan who fashions iron into an instrument for daily use whose method of forging is fire.

“ ...[T]he artisan who by his skill has to fashion iron to some instrument for daily use, has need not only of that which owing to its natural ductility lends itself to his art, but, be the iron never so hard, be it never so difficult to soften it in the fire, be it even impossible owing to its adamant resistance to mould it into any useful implement, his art requires the co-operation even of this; he will use it for an anvil, upon which the soft workable iron may be beaten and formed into something useful.”<sup>67</sup>

Gregory wrote this treatise while his mind was grappling with infants' premature deaths. Despite the fact that a child's death is evil, God is always in control and able to bring good out of evil<sup>68</sup>. Did He not allow Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, to be born and to grow up as such he was? This was for the benefit of Israel, for that Great Nation to be instructed by his disaster. They learned that "God's omnipotence is to be recognized in every direction; it has strength to bless the deserving [The Israelites if they remain in His favor] ; it is not inadequate to the punishment of wickedness [Pharaoh is an example].<sup>69</sup>" Although God is not the author of evil, He fashions out of it, like an artisan with fire, what is good and beneficial to His people. The use of fire as a metaphor in contriving good out of evil alludes to the possibility that God, in Gregory's mind, is the agent of purging evil from the soul. The good that comes out of this purging is her eternal contemplation of the Beautiful.

Gregory's use of metaphors sheds a clarifying light onto his complicated theological discourses. One such metaphor was used in his argument in *Contra Eunomium* or "Against Eunomius"<sup>70</sup> concerning the two natures of Jesus Christ. In this metaphor, he explicitly identifies fire with Christ's Divine Nature. In addressing the issue of "what it is that dies, and what it is that destroys death; what it is that is renewed, and what it is that empties itself,"<sup>71</sup> Gregory states,

“ “And as fire that lies in wood hidden below the surface is often unobserved by the senses of those who see, or even touch it, but is manifest when it blazes up, so too, at His death ... He Who, because He is the Lord of glory...having concealed, as it were, the flame of His life in His bodily Nature, by the dispensation of His death, kindled and inflamed it once more by the power of His own Godhead...<sup>72</sup>”

Here Gregory explicitly analogizes fire to the Divine Nature of God but does not make any connection to fire purging evil. It is important to keep in mind, however, that fire, with its multivalent meanings, can refer to the Godhead.

In *Contra Eunomium*, Gregory explicitly refers to God as the agent for the annihilation of evil.

“And this we declare to be the mystery of the Lord according to the flesh, that He Who is immutable came to be in that which is mutable, to the end that altering it for the better, and changing it from the worse, He might abolish the evil which is mingled with our mutable condition, destroying the evil in Himself. For ‘our God is a consuming fire<sup>73</sup>,’ by whom all the material of wickedness is done away.<sup>74</sup>”

Indeed, God annihilates all evil that came to be intermingled with our nature. He is “the consuming fire” that eliminates any and all remnants of wickedness that cemented itself to the human being whom God created in his image and likeness. The One Who is Good by nature does not create human nature tainted with evil because He does not know evil. However, man’s misguided notion of the Good and the Beautiful causes evil to intermix with the human soul. God is the author of virtue in the human soul, refreshing, cleansing, and purging her from evil. God did not create human beings to be ultimately destroyed, but rather to give them life everlasting. Gregory wraps up his arguments in *De anima et resurrectione* stating,

“When such, then, have been purged from it and utterly removed by the healing processes worked out by the Fire, then every one of the things which make up our conception of the good will come to take their place; incorruption, that is, and life, and honour, and grace, and glory, and everything else that we conjecture is to be seen in God, and in His Image, man as he was made.<sup>75</sup>”

Moreover, Gregory uses the metaphor of gold refining in his *Oratio Catechetica Magna* or “The Great Catechism.<sup>76</sup>” The approach of Divine power acts like fire for the purpose of causing the annihilation of any unnatural accretion. Therefore, purgation is not, as stated above, a necessary “evil” but a state of blessedness<sup>77</sup> despite the fact that the soul will go through agonizing and excruciating pain. Here is the Bishop of Nyssa in his own words,

“For it is as when some worthless material has been mixed with gold, and the gold-refiners burn up the foreign and refuse part in the consuming fire, and so restore the more precious substance to its natural lustre: (not that the separation is effected without difficulty, for it takes time for the fire by its melting force to cause the baser matter to disappear; but for all that, this melting away of the actual thing that was embedded in it to the injury of its beauty is a kind of healing of the gold.) In the same way when death, and corruption, and darkness, and every other offshoot of evil had grown into the nature of the author of evil, the approach of the Divine power, acting like fire<sup>78</sup>, and making that unnatural accretion to disappear, thus by purgation of the evil becomes a blessing to that nature, though the separation is agonizing.<sup>79</sup>”

What remains to be addressed herein are how God actually purifies the soul and what causes the soul to suffer. The answer to the later question will help strengthen the argument that the fire of purgation, in Gregory's mind, is a metaphor for God. Gregory does not use fire as a physical, material, independent entity that purges the immaterial soul but rather as a metaphor for God. He does not envision a kiln lit with purifying fire into which God, the cause of purification, keeps the soul until it is purified from all sins. How, then, does God purify the soul? What causes the soul to suffer?

As stated above, Macrina employs two metaphors to propound the theological idea of purgation: 1) gold refining, and 2) the rope being pulled through a hole. She lucidly expresses her idea of purging the soul from evil and the agonizing pain that she will go through in the process. These metaphors fall short in explaining how the actual process of purging the soul will occur, however. The “how” remains wanting. The mind can go so far in investigating that which is unknowable and must remain silent. The competent and talented theologians reach the limit of their knowledge and retreat, not in defeat, but in humility and awe before the Awesome and Magnificent One, the ever fully unknowable Godhead.

Although Gregory does not explain how the actual purging of the soul occurs, beyond the application of metaphors, he is adamant that she will suffer. He gives the reason for this suffering in metaphorical and philosophical/theological language. Unlike the metaphor of gold which uses fire as the means by which purification occurs, the metaphor of the rope pulled through a hole employs an agent who actuates the purging by pulling the rope toward him through a hole. Besides, this agent corresponds to God who draws the soul toward him. Macrina offers the following metaphor immediately after the metaphor of gold trying; she says,

“If a clay of the more tenacious kind is deeply plastered round a rope, and then the end of the rope is put through a narrow hole, and then some one on the further side violently pulls it by that end, the result must be that, while the rope itself obeys the force exerted, the clay that has been plastered upon it is scraped off it with this violent pulling and is left outside the hole, and, moreover, is the cause why the rope does not run easily through the passage, but has to undergo a violent tension at the hands of the puller. In such a manner, I think, we may figure to ourselves the agonized struggle of that soul which has wrapped itself up in earthy material passions, when God is drawing it, His own one, to Himself, and the foreign matter, which has somehow grown into its substance, has to be scraped from it by main force, and so occasions it that keen intolerable anguish.<sup>80</sup>”

The rope corresponds to the soul, the clay to evil, and the one who is violently pulling the rope through the hole to God. The intent of the puller is to draw the rope toward him. However, the rope cannot go through the hole because clay “of the more tenacious kind” clings to it and makes it large so that it could not go through the hole without force. Therefore, by his actions the puller scrapes the clay off the rope while pulling it toward him. Instead of passing through the hole smoothly, the strands of the rope undergo a violent tension and are pulled in opposite directions. The force applied at one end of the rope to cause it to pass through the hole and the frictional forces, due to the presence of the clay, pulling on it in the opposite

direction cause the rope to go through extreme stresses and strains to the point of breaking. These tremendous tensile forces applied to the rope correspond to the suffering of the soul while the Beautiful is drawing her toward Him.

God, whose epithets are the Beautiful and the Good, has a nature that is non-material and invisible. He is the creator of all things in the universe; including human beings. Human beings, nonetheless, are unlike anything else He created, for He created them in His “image and likeness<sup>81</sup>” and they are the only creatures into whom God breathed the “breath of life.<sup>82</sup>” The soul is that which is created in the image and likeness of God. It is necessary, therefore, that that which is created in the “image and likeness” of its Creator possesses a likeness to its prototype in every respect<sup>83</sup>. Furthermore, “it resembles it in being intellectual, immaterial, unconnected with any notion of weight, and in eluding any measurement of its dimensions; yet as regards its own peculiar nature it is something different from that other<sup>84</sup>” and hence the soul possesses a similar nature to God’s.

When the soul separates from the body its natural inclination is to be drawn toward its Creator for like attracts like. This philosophical notion Gregory also applies in connection with the dissolution of the body. The science of his days taught that four elements<sup>85</sup> composes everything in creation; earth, fire, water, and air. The body of the human being is not different. These four elements come together to form the body, which the soul animates, and return to the abodes of their like when the body decomposes. “[T]he body, being composed, must necessarily be resolved into that of which it is composed...each of those elements gravitates towards its kindred elements with the irresistible bias of like to like.<sup>86</sup>” The soul, being immaterial and something different than these elements, does not decompose with the body’s dissolution. Nonetheless, the principle of attraction between those that are alike remains. Since the soul’s nature is similar to that of God’s, she is drawn up toward Him. What impedes her unification with her like is evil that became intermingled with her when she was embodied on earth. In a sense, two natures now co-exist in the soul, the nature of the soul and the nature of evil<sup>87</sup>; the latter draws it toward this life and its passions and the former toward God.

A tug of war, therefore, is being waged; at the one end, God draws the soul unto Him, at the other, passions and attraction to this life draw the soul in the opposite direction. This dragging and pulling cause the soul to suffer; God draws “that which belongs to Him” and this very drawing causes the torment of passion-laden soul. Indeed, this severing of the bondage of sin causes the soul to suffer. The attraction to the Beautiful whose nature is similar to that of the soul is stronger than the attraction to that which is dissimilar because “what belongs to God must at any cost be preserved for



Him.<sup>88</sup> God is not the cause of this torment but the soul that chose to intermingle her nature with which that was foreign to it is. God, the immutable One, never stops drawing her unto Him when she was embodied or after her disembodiment. God is the heavenly physician who provides the soul with the cure which “consists in the cleaning of the soul, and that cannot be achieved without an excruciating condition<sup>89</sup>.” Cleansing the soul in this metaphor corresponds to the removing of the clay that is attached to the rope and the excruciating condition to the extreme tensile stresses and stains applied to the rope during to this tug of war.

What characteristics does the soul exhibit for her attraction to God? What specifically did the Creator imprint in his utmost creation that it cannot but be drawn to Him? Love and freedom<sup>90</sup>. Not only does love belong to the soul by nature, for it is “the inherent affection towards a chosen object,<sup>91</sup>” but also freedom. God gifted them to human beings from the beginning. Consequently, they belong to the soul by nature, and are the dynamos that propel her attraction to the Beautiful. The faculty to love does not cease to exist after the soul is purged from all passions. Macrina explains, “the soul copies the life that is above, and is conformed to the peculiar features of the Divine nature; none of its habits are left to it except that of love, which clings by natural affinity to the Beautiful.<sup>92</sup>” Furthermore, love, as the Apostle taught, endures<sup>93</sup>. The enduring love and freedom in the human soul are directed toward God who is Love and the author of all virtues including freedom. They are the cause for her suffering and blessedness. False desires through the misguiding reason compete with this perfect condition of love and freedom and draw her away from the Good, thus causing her excruciating pain. The negative affect of purgation is suffering, which is temporary. Nevertheless, what endures and is eternal is the blessed state that awaits the soul. The passionless soul does not wander aimlessly<sup>94</sup>, for she continues to be free and to love that which is worth loving and moves unimpeded to the source of love and freedom. Macrina explains how the principle of attraction operates. Speaking on freedom, she says,

“Liberty too is in all cases one and the same essentially; it has a natural attraction to itself. It follows, then, that as everything that is free will be united with its like, and as virtue is a thing that has no master, that is, is free, everything that is free will be united with virtue. But, further, the Divine Being is the fountain of all virtue.<sup>95</sup>”

Therefore,

“ “When, then, the soul, having become simple and single in form and so perfectly godlike, finds that perfectly simple and immaterial good which is really worth enthusiasm and love, it attaches itself to it and blends with it by means of the movement and activity of love, fashioning itself according to that which it is continually finding and grasping.<sup>96</sup>”

The soul is no longer restless for God, by purging the soul, has finally restored her to the perfect original state.

## Conclusion

In his *De anima et resurrectione*, Gregory of Nyssa faced the reality of death, human beings' greatest enemy. Eschatology was his focus for it is natural to wonder what awaits the soul of loved ones once they are no longer living. On the one hand, the Saints will enjoy eternal blessedness for their souls will soar upward and unimpeded to the Beautiful. On the other hand, a purifying fire awaits sinful souls for they are tainted by evil. The use of purifying fire in Gregory's exposition is biblically founded. Furthermore, unlike fire that consumes all that comes its way, the fire of purgation cures and heals the soul from evil that became intermingled with her. The Heavenly Physician administers the required and necessary cure to the evil-laden soul. Deserving as she may be, God, "the Consuming Fire," does not inflict punishment on the sinful soul. Rather, she is the author of her excruciating pain for her continuous attachment to this physical life. The intensity and "duration" of the suffering depends on the soul's attachment to evil. How will the actual healing occur? The reader of *De anima et resurrectione* is left wondering.

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3. Daniélou, Jean. *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse*. Leiden: Brill, 1970.
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7. Gregory of Nyssa. "On the Soul and the Resurrection." In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, v:430-648. Second Series. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995.
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18. Wessel, Susan. "Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa's *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2010): 369-392.

#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Second Edition* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2003), ¶1033-1037, 292-293.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶1030-1032, 291.

<sup>4</sup> A. Mouhanna lists Origen, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Jerome, St. Ephrem, and Gregory of Nyssa as theologians who adopted the teaching of universal salvation. See A. Mouhanna, "La Conception du Salut Universel Selon Saint Grégoire de Nysse," in *Weg in Die Zukunft: Festschrift Für Prof. DDr. Anton Antweiler*

Zu Seinem 75. Geburtstag, ed. Adel-Theodor Khoury and Margot Wiegels, *Studies in the history of religions, supplements to Numen* v. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 135-136.

5 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. v, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 430-648.

6 On Basil the Great, see Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

7 Gregory wrote a letter addressed to the monk Olympius who had been with him at the Council of Antioch (341 A.D.). In this letter, he writes about the life of his sister Macrina. To read about this influential woman, see Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of St. Macrina*, trans. W. K. Lowther Clarke, *Early church classics* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1916).

8 See J. Warren Smith, "Macrina, Tamer of Horses and Healer of Souls: Grief and the Therapy of Hope in Gregory of Nyssa's *De anima et resurrectione*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 52, no. 1 (2001): 37 -60.

9 For a brief survey of the usage on the Greek word ἀποκατάστασις see Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, *Oxford theological monographs* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38-44.

10 For Gregory of Nyssa's concept of restoration to a perfect state see Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 45-76.

11 Did Gregory of Nyssa fully commit himself to universal salvation? A. Mouhanna quoting Jean Daniélou writes, "Nonobstant les nombreux témoignages en faveur d'un salut universel, Daniélou pense néanmoins trouver quelques hésitations chez Grégoire. 'Sa pensée l'au-dessus, dit-il, est flottante. D'une part il affirme un enfer éternel, de l'autre il lui semble difficile que le mal dure toujours.' Quelques lignes plus loin Daniélou affirme que Grégoire 'pose la possibilité d'une distinction entre une éternité heureuse et une éternité malheureuse, et d'une restauration de l'humanité à sa condition première que n'entraîne pas la béatitude de tous les hommes.'..." See A. Mouhanna, "La Conception du Salut Universel Selon Saint Grégoire de Nysse," in *Weg in Die Zukunft: Festschrift Für Prof. DDr. Anton Antweiler Zu Seinem 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Adel Théodore Khoury and Margot Wiegels, *Studies in the history of religions, supplements to Numen*

v. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 141. Mouhanna does not agree with Daniélou's assessment and refutes his arguments point by point. Jean Daniélou, "L'apocatastase Chez Saint Grégoire de Nysse," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 30, no. 3 (Juillet 1940).

12 On the nature of passions in Gregory's teachings see J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2004), 75-103.

13 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

14 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

15 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

16 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448-449.

17 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 449.

18 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

19 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

20 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

21 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

22 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

23 "Since, then, there has been inbred in the soul a strong natural tendency to evil, it must suffer, just as the excision of a wart gives a sharp pain to the skin of the body; for whatever contrary to the nature has been inbred in the nature attaches itself to the subject in a certain union of feeling, and hence there is produced an abnormal intermixture of our own with an alien quality, so that the feelings, when the separation from this abnormal growth comes, are hurt and lacerated. Thus when the soul pines and melts away under the correction of its sins, as prophecy somewhere tells us, there necessarily follow, from its deep and intimate connection with evil, certain unspeakable and inexpressible pangs, the description of which is as difficult to render as is that of the nature of those good things which are the subjects of our hope." In Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechism," 484.

24 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

25 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 465.

26 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 465.

27 1 Corinthians 15, 28.

28 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 459.

29 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 465.

30 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

31 On the influence of Greek philosophy on Gregory see Michel René Barnes, "Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendent Causality," *Vigiliae Christianae* 52, no. 1 (1998): 59-87; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism: Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Biblical and Philosophical Basis of the Doctrine of Apokatastasis," *Vigiliae Christianae* 61, no. 3 (2007): 313-356.

32 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 439.

33 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 442.

34 On the scriptural foundation of ἀποκατάστασις in Gregory of Nyssa see Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Christian Soteriology and Christian Platonism," 314-338.

35 For Gregory of Nyssa's concept of restoration to a perfect state see Ludlow, *Universal Salvation*, 45-76.

36 Matthew 13:24-30; Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 442-443.

37 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 442.

38 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 443.

39 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 443.

40 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 442.

41 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 440.

42 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 440.

43 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450.

44 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

45 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

46 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

47 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

48 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

49 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

50 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

51 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

52 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 447.

53 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

54 See below.

55 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

56 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

57 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

58 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

59 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 448.

60 Malachi 3:2; Jeremiah 6:29.

61 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

62 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 452.

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64 On the Christocentric foundation of universal salvation in the corpus of Gregory of Nyssa, see Steven R. Harmon, “The Subjection of All Things in Christ: The Christocentric Universalism of Gregory of Nyssa.” In “All Shall Be Well”: Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann, edited by Gregory MacDonald, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 47-65.

65 Gregory of Nyssa, “On Infants’ Early Deaths,” in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. v, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 372-381.

66 Gregory of Nyssa, “On Infants’ Early Deaths,” 380.

67 Gregory of Nyssa, “On Infants’ Early Deaths,” 380-381.

68 Genesis 45:5 and 50:20.

69 Gregory of Nyssa, “On Infants’ Early Deaths,” 380.

70 Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. v, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 33-248.

71 Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” 181.

72 Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” 181.

73 Hebrews 12, 29.

74 Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” 179.

75 Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Soul and the Resurrection,” 468.

76 Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. v, Second Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 473-509.

77 Gregory refers to this cure, despite the excruciating pain that the soul will endure, as a good thing because the telos is contemplating the Beautiful. He says, "...because of all this the Producer of all Good would work in us the cure of such an evil. A cure is a good thing, but one who does not look to the evangelic mystery would still be ignorant of the manner of the cure. We have shown that alienation from God, Who is the Life, is an evil; the cure, then, of this infirmity is, again to be made friends with God, and so to be in life once more." In Gregory of Nyssa, "On Infants' Early Deaths," 376. Furthermore, Gergory states that human beings will be grateful for that which had happened for they will be in the state of blessedness. "For it is now as with those who for their cure are subjected to the knife and the cautery; they are angry with the doctors, and wince with the pain of the incision; but if recovery of health be the result of this treatment, and the pain of the cautery passes away, they will feel grateful to those who have wrought this cure upon them. In like manner, when, after long periods of time, the evil of our nature, which now is mixed up with it and has grown with its growth, has been expelled, and when there has been a restoration of those who are now lying in Sin to their primal state, a harmony of thanksgiving will arise from all creation, as well from those who in the process of the purgation have suffered chastisement, as from those who needed not any purgation at all." In Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechism," 496.

78 "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand firm when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire, like fullers' lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and he will purify the Levites, refining them like gold or silver, that they may bring offerings to the LORD in righteousness." Malachi 3:2-3

79 Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechism," 495-496.

80 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 451.

81 Genesis 1:26-27;

82 Genesis 2:7

83 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 436.

84 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 436-437.

85 On Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of the four elements that form the cosmos see Jean Daniélou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: BRILL, 1970), 75-94.

86 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 431.

87 Despite the fact that evil seems to be the agent causing the soul's attraction to this life, it does not stand in opposition to God. It is not another deity and it exists insofar as the person chooses that which is not good. "For there is no other origin of evil except the negation of the existent, and the truly-existent forms the substance of the Good." In Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450.

88 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450-451.

89 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 465.

90 On universal salvation and freedom see Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner*, Oxford theological monographs (Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95-111.

91 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450.

92 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450.

93 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

94 Susan Wessel, "Memory and Individuality in Gregory of Nyssa's *Dialogus de anima et resurrectione*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2010): 382.

95 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 452.

96 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and the Resurrection," 450.