

Ten Days of Penitence, also called the “Days of Awe” or the “High Holy Days,” precede the Day of Atonement. These Days of Awe are the first ten days of the month of Tishri,¹ from Rosh Ha-Shanah — literally meaning “head of the year” — to Yom Kippur.

According to ancient belief, God keeps a record book of our actions, good and evil. It is during the High Holy Days that God determines who shall live and who shall die in the coming year. During these first days of the New Year, God opens the book and writes therein the names of those who will live through the coming year.

The central theme of the Days of Awe is repentance, or teshuvah, literally meaning “returning to one’s self.” The preceding Hebrew month of Elul is set aside as a time for reflection and soul-searching so the Days of Awe might be entered into in the proper spirit. According to Jewish tradition, there are conditions necessary for teshuvah — regret for past negative behavior, willingness to confess sins before God and a resolve to amend wicked behavior. In the words of the Psalmist, “depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Ps. 34:30). The opportunity to repent extends until the end of the tenth Holy Day, the Day of Atonement, when Jews fast as a sign of contrition.

¹ The month of Tishri is the first month of the chronological Jewish year. In the 20th century, Tishri, in its earliest occurrence, extends from September 6 to October 5 and, in its latest, from October 5 to November 3.

Jews will visit the graves of their loved ones just prior to the Days of Awe in the belief the deceased can intercede in heaven on behalf of the living. This stems from the belief that the patriarchs had stored up an excess of merit for themselves and that the surplus could be transferred to benefit the living. These concepts are analogous to the Catholic belief in the Communion of Saints and the Treasury of Merit. It is through the application of the superabundant merits of Christ and the saints that indulgences are granted through the exercise of the power of the keys given to Saint Peter and Peter’s successors.

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The Theology of Indulgences.

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There are few doctrines of the Catholic Church that have been more grossly misrepresented by Protestant writers than the doctrine of Indulgence. A common opinion of our non-Catholic friends is that an indulgence means not only the full pardon of sins committed but also a license to commit further sins. They allege, moreover, that the most essential condition for obtaining an indulgence is the payment to a priest of a certain sum of money. Nothing could be further from the truth.

An indulgence is the remission before God of the temporal punishment due to those sins of which the guilt has been forgiven, either in the sacrament of Penance or because of an act of perfect contrition, granted by the competent ecclesiastical authority out of the Church’s Treasury of Merits — to the living by way of absolution, to the dead by way of suffrage. It is called *temporal* because, whether endured in this world or the next, it will last only *for a time*, in contrast to the *eternal* punishment of hell, which every serious sin deserves. The liability to *eternal* punishment that attaches itself to serious sin ceases as soon as the sin itself is effaced from the soul.

The Treasury of Merits — sometimes called the Treasury of Satisfaction or the Treasury of the Church — is the superabundant store of the merits and satisfactions of Christ, which were beyond

the needs of our salvation, to which are added the excess of merits and satisfactions of Our Lady and the saints. It is from this treasury that the Pope grants indulgences.

As God is the Creator and the Lord of the universe, there is no norm of justice that transcends him; God is the supreme norm, He is justice personified. God manifests His justice in that He, as a judge, shows no partiality (Romans 2:11) — He rewards the good and punishes the wicked.

The rewarding of the good and the punishing of the wicked is not merely a work of Divine Justice, but also an operation of the Divine Mercy, as He rewards beyond merit (Matt. 19:29) and punishes less than merited.

On the other hand, the remission of sin is not merely a work of mercy, but at the same time a work of justice, as God demands from the sinner repentance and atonement. For example, King David sinned against the Lord by murdering Uriah the Hittite because he desired Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. David repented this sin before the prophet Nathan and God forgave him, but God also demanded the life of David's son in recompense for scorning the Lord (2 Sam. 12:1-18).

Adam and Eve are an earlier example of the same truth. God pardoned their sin of disobedience but inflicted centuries of the most rigorous hardships. So too were Moses and Aaron pardoned of their sin, which was but a slight transgression of the divine command, yet they were both punished by being deprived of the pleasure of entering the promised land (Num. 20; Deut. 36).

The punishment ordained by God for the sinner is not merely a means of improvement and warning, but is above all retribution for the insult offered to God. We must make some atonement for our ingratitude to God. If this satisfaction to the divine justice is not made in this world, it must be made, even to the "last penny," in the purifying fires of purgatory. Such has always been the interpretation of those words of Jesus in Luke (and Matt. 5:25): "As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the very last copper" (12:58-59)

All Christians know and admit that Christ's satisfaction for sin is simply infinite in itself — it is inexhaustible. Moreover, Catholics believe the good works of all the just believers, who are living members of Christ's body, are the works of Christ Himself, their Divine Head. The Church has consistently and indignantly repudiated and denounced the Protestant doctrine of mere imputed justice. When God pardons the sinner, he does not merely cloak over his corruption with Christ's merits — as the Reformers held — but he blots out the stain of sin from the soul, beautifies it with his holy grace and enlivens it with his own divine life.

Each soul thus united to Christ may truly say with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). In such a soul, Christ lives and works. Therefore the good works of the just are not

only meritorious of a reward, but they possess an expiatory virtue — that is, they not only deserve a reward proportionate to their value in God's sight, but also merit the remission of the temporal punishment due to sin.

This last effect of good works — the efficacy in remitting sins committed — may far exceed in value the debt owed to God because of His justice. Of this God alone can judge; He alone can estimate their value. But whatever is not needed by him who performs these good works for the remission of the temporal punishment his own sins deserve, goes to make up — together with the merits of Christ — a common treasury, placed at the Church's disposal for the benefit of Her needy children.

Hence, when in virtue of an Indulgence the deserved punishment is remitted, God always receives satisfaction — which he claims and which his justice demands. The debt due to Him is paid in full out of the treasury laid up in the Church — the inexhaustible treasury of the merits of Christ and his saints.

The Day of Atonement

The Church's doctrine on indulgences is a legitimate outgrowth of Jewish belief in an afterlife and an individual's final judgment before the throne of God. Orthodox Jewish belief is the final judgment is but the culmination of a series of annual judgments, which take place on Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement), the most important day in the Jewish liturgical year.