

Purgatory: Some Questions

by Jim Seghers

The Inquiry

I am a Protestant Christian and I am currently doing some research on the Catholic Church. I have some questions about Purgatory. I am simply curious as to the foundation upon which the belief in Purgatory exists. After looking at your website and seeing the impressive answers you have given to many other questions I felt that you may be able to accurately inform me on this subject.

Thank you so much for your time. It is deeply appreciated!

Here are my questions:

Is Purgatory in the Bible and if so where is it found?

Does the belief in Purgatory negate the belief in salvation?

Does the Catholic Church believe in Hell?

Can anyone get into heaven, via Purgatory, if they have never confessed a belief in Jesus?

The Reply

Good questions deserve good answers. Therefore I will attempt to answer your good questions completely.

I. Question: Is Purgatory in the Bible and if so where is it found?

Answer: The word “purgatory” is not found in the Bible because it comes from the Latin *purgatorius* – purging. The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. However, the concept of Purgatory is clearly taught in the Bible. Before we examine the Biblical passages that support the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, it will prove helpful to begin with a clear understanding of its meaning.

Purgatory is final purification of the elect. It is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.¹ “To understand this doctrine and practice of the Church, it is necessary to understand that sin has a *double consequence*. Grave sin² deprives us of communion with God and therefore makes us incapable of eternal life, the privation of which is called the “eternal punishment” of sin. On the other hand every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death in the state called Purgatory. This purification frees one from what is called the “temporal punishment” of sin.

¹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church \(henceforth listed as CCC\), #1031.](#)

² For the Biblical distinction between Grave or Mortal sin and sins that are not deadly (venial sins), see 1 Jn 4:16-17).

These two punishments must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin. A conversion which proceeds from a fervent charity can attain the complete purification of the sinner in such a way that no punishment would remain.”³

1. Nothing Unclean enters heaven:

Rev 21:27 - “**But nothing unclean shall enter it**, nor any one who practices abominations or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Heb 12:14 – “Pursue peace with everyone, and the **holiness without which no one will see the Lord.**”

2. Cleansing Fire:

1 Cor 3:15 - “If any man’s work is burned up, he will **suffer loss**, though he himself will be saved, **but only as through fire.**”

Interpretation:

In the context Paul cites (3:4-17) the dissensions at Corinth (1:11-13) to show that the Corinthians are acting in a very unspiritual way (3:4). He makes the point that it is God alone “who gives the growth” (3:7). Men are merely God’s instruments, his servants or ministers (3:5) and fellow workers (3:9).

He develops this with two similes. The first centers on crops in a field (3:6-9) and the second on a building of deeds (3:9-17). In describing the reward given to those who work at building the Church (3:14-15), Paul makes it very clear that everyone is paid according to his works. Upright living and correct teaching constitute good material. Anything less than that is defective material that must be discarded, that is, “burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire” (3:15).

The Catholic exegesis is further supported by Paul’s use of the Greek word *zemiotesetai*, “suffer loss.” Its root verb, *zemioo*, has a wider meaning than merely suffering loss. It can also refer to punishment. This component of punishment is not brought out in most translation. In the Septuagint, *zemioo* is used only in reference to punishment. Thus the lexical meaning of *zemiotesetai* fits very well with the classical Catholic interpretation of this passage, namely, that the Christian will suffer punishment for his bad works. In some cases this punishment is eternal. In other cases it is temporal in Purgatory.

Also the Greek word *houtos*, (v. 15) translated in the RSV as “but only,” has the lexical meanings of: “likewise,” “similarly,” “even so,” “in the same manner,” “in the same way,” etc. It is an adverb modifying the preceding verb “will be saved.” “If any man’s work is burned up, he will

³ [CCC, #1472.](#)

suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, **but only** as through fire.” It indicates how the **man** is saved, that is, “through fire” (1 Cor 3:15).

It is also fruitful to compare the fire of verse 13 with the fire of verse 15. Paul teaches that as God’s fire will purify any dross from the work accomplished in verse 13 so, too, will fire refine the man himself of any impurities in verse 15.

The Bible uses two images of God’s fire. One is the purifying fire of God’s love that makes good material better (Mal 3:2-3; 1 Pet 1:7). The other is the consuming fire of God’s wrath that punishes (2 Thess 1:8; Heb 12:6, 10, 29). God himself is described as a “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

1 Pet 1:7 — “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which through perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Interpretation:

Verses 3-12 are a hymn of praise and gratitude to God. In verses 3-5: Peter proclaims that the Redemption affects a kind of rebirth, which, if we are faithful, will cause us to receive an inheritance that is “kept in heaven.” In verses 6-9 he teaches that the hope of obtaining this inheritance brings Christians joy in the midst of the trials that test their faith. It is implied that this testing process “by fire” may be completed in the next life if needed.

For other passages that allude to purgatory see: Dan 12:10; Mt 5:26; 12:32; 1 Pet 3:19; Jude 23.

3. Praying for the Dead and Forgiveness After Death:

We learn from graffiti in the catacombs that praying for the dead goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. Ancient Christian documents such as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the writings of Perpetua, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, and Augustine speak clearly about the Christian practice of praying for the dead. All of these Christian citations were written between A.D. 160 and 421. This practice makes no sense except for a belief that they needed prayers because they were undergoing purification.

2 Macc 12:42,46 - “and they turned to **prayer**, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be **wholly blotted out**. . . Therefore he made **atonement for the dead**, that they might be **delivered from their sin**.”

Interpretation:

After a battle Judas discovered that the men who had fallen in battle had under their tunics “sacred tokens of the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear” (2 Macc 12:40). Their prayer and sacrifices for the dead indicates a time of purification between death and heaven. This makes no sense if these fallen soldiers were either in heaven or hell.

Contemporary observant Jews continue to pray for the dead with the prayer called the Mourner's Kaddish.

Sir 7:33 - "Give graciously to all the living, and **withhold not kindness from the dead.**" Why do the dead need kindness if they are in heaven? The passage has no meaning if they are in hell.

4. Some Sins Can Be Forgiven After Death:

Mt 12:32 – "And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age **or in the age to come.**"

II. Question: Does the belief in Purgatory negate the belief in salvation?

Answer: I am not sure what you mean by "negate the belief in salvation". The Catholic Church teaches that "our justification comes from the grace of God."⁴ Furthermore, the Council of Trent issued the following dogmatic statement, which all Catholics are bound to believe:

"We are therefore said to be justified **by faith**, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God ... We are therefore said to be justified **gratuitously** [that is, not by works], because none of those things that precede justification, **whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.**"⁵

Purgatory is not a second chance, but the final purification for some of those who die in God's grace. Therefore Purgatory does not negate the mercy of salvation in Jesus Christ; it exemplifies it.

III. Question: Does the Catholic Church believe in Hell?

Answer: Absolutely! "The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs."⁶

⁴ [CCC, #1996.](#)

⁵ Trent, "Justification," Chapter 8.

⁶ [CCC, #1035.](#)

IV. Question: Can anyone get into heaven, via Purgatory, if they have never confessed a belief in Jesus?

Answer: The Catholic Church teaches that the redemption of **all men** comes from Jesus Christ: “By his glorious Cross Christ has won salvation for all men. He redeemed them from the sin that held them in bondage.”⁷

In addition the Catholic Church teaches that: “**Believing** in Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is **necessary** for obtaining that salvation. Since ‘**without faith** it is **impossible** to please [God]’ and to attain the fellowship of his sons, therefore **without faith no one has ever attained justification.**”⁸

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⁷ [CCC, #1741](#).

⁸ [CCC, #61](#). In the footnote the *Catechism* cites: Mk 16:16; Jn 3:36; 6:40; Rom 3:22, 24; 11:6; Mt 10:22; 24:13; Heb 11:6; and Trent (1547): DS 1532.