

Is Purgatory Real?

Those who subscribe to the idea of purgatory believe that there is a kind of in-between place that someone goes to after they die; a stop-over in route to one's eternal destination. It's possible that some who believe in purgatory are fans of Dante's Divine Comedy; a poem written in the 14th century that describes various destinations for where one can go after a person dies, which the author calls Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. Those unfamiliar with this writing, but who still believe in purgatory, might be those brought up with a Catholic background. In any case, purgatory is believed by some to be a place where bad-enough sinners go, who may be recipients of God's grace, but can't yet get into heaven, as they still must undergo some measure of purification or temporal punishment for any sins that weren't atoned for before they died. In short, one goes there to be purged; to be made fit/worthy of heaven.

Before going any further, let me be clear, there is no such thing as purgatory and there never has been. There has only ever been heaven or hell for every individual after they die.

Some faiths do however teach that purgatory is real. Here is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says in defining purgatory. *"All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned."*

The Roman Catholic Church includes extra-Biblical texts in their Bible, called the Apocrypha. One of those Apocryphal books is 2 Maccabees. In 2 Maccabees 12:45 there is this sentence: *"Therefore [Judas Maccabeus] made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin."* From statements like this, the Catholic Church infers that not only should you pray for the dead (which isn't Biblical), and sometimes even take an offering for the salvation of the dead (also not Biblical), but that the dead can undergo a spiritual process of deliverance after they've passed away (not Biblical). Opinions like these leads some to speculate a place like purgatory. Let me pause here to urge readers that additional books outside the Bible, like the Apocrypha, should never be considered as Scripture.

Purging the sins of the dead is simply not a Biblical reality. Christ's death on the cross provides complete atonement for sin, period. Nothing more needs to be done. Atonement means to completely cover; as Christ's blood sacrifice covers all sin to those who believe. Some might ask, *"But what about those who died before Christ's death? What hope was there for believers who lived and died before Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross?"* Take Abraham for example, who obviously lived and died before Christ. Genesis 15:6, Abraham, ***"believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."*** Since Adam's sin, salvation has always been based on the death of Jesus. Those living prior to the cross were saved by the eventual sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This means that Christ's death paid the penalty for past sins for all believers beforehand, and future believers after the cross. The only requirement for salvation has always been faith and the object of one's faith for salvation has always been the Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, who would eventually come to the earth as a man, named Jesus. Abraham passed away almost two-thousand years before Jesus' death, and still, at the moment of Abraham's death, he was present with the Lord in heaven. Abraham wasn't put into some sort of temporary holding area, until Christ's eventual death, as though heaven and hell suddenly became *"open for business"* only after the cross. This just isn't supported in Scripture. During Jesus' ministry before He went to the cross, He made statements declaring His present relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, (Matthew 22). This implies an active and living relationship, denoting that they serve Him and that He enjoys a relationship with them.

The Bible does have a couple of verses, that at a quick glance, can seem to point to a type of purgatory. One commonly referenced passage is Luke 16:19-31. You can read it in full for yourself. In summary, it's a teaching of Jesus' about the afterlife, which focuses on a conversation between an unnamed rich man and Abraham. This passage is not a description of a temporary stop-over for either the rich man in Hades (described as being in flames, agony, and torment), nor is it a stop-over for Lazarus and Abraham who are abiding in a place of comfort. The rich man is in eternal hell, and Abraham and Lazarus are in eternal heaven. Abraham tells the rich man in verses 25-26 why the rich man is in hell and goes on to say that there's no way out and that the rich man will never leave the place he's at. This is an eternal statement about where these men are; both for heaven and hell. Verse 26 reads, ***"And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us."*** In other words, any thought of a temporary purgatory before entering into heaven is out of the question. Nobody moves from one location to another.

Another alleged purgatory text, is 1 Corinthians 3:13-15, ***"Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."*** Unlike the idea of purgatory, this text doesn't suggest anything about people passing through any period of time with the aim of purging one of his impure sin. Instead, this describes a moment, a single event, where the deeds of our lives are exposed to be either worthless and having no eternal value, or precious and worthy of heavenly rewards. This is a passage describing the value of believers building treasure in heaven. There's nothing here about the idea of a post-death purgatory.

As it is, the Scriptures point in the opposite direction of purgatory, and talk about what really happens when a believer dies. Philippians 1:23: ***"My desire is to depart [i.e. die] and be with Christ, for that is far better."*** Paul is content doing the work of the Lord here, but he knows it's far better to be with the Lord in heaven. Paul makes clear that upon death, as a believer, he will be with Christ, not waiting somewhere until he's pure enough to be with the Lord. Likewise, in 2 Corinthians 5:6-9, ***"Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord - for we walk by faith, not by sight - we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."*** Paul clarifies that to be absent from the body (i.e. dead) is to be at home with the Lord.

Did Jesus Go to Hell for a Bit After He Died?

Somewhat related to this topic, as far as asking where people go when they die, is the question of where did Jesus go when He died. Some will claim that Jesus descended into hell after He died on the cross. I believe this claim is a misinterpretation. A couple of common verses that people site on this topic are, Ephesians 4:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:18-20. Ephesians 4:9 says, ***"(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)"*** Here, Christ's ascension and descension refer to his descending to earth from heaven. That fact that Jesus ascended up into heaven in front of many witnesses (Acts 1), only affirms that He had at one point descended from heaven to the lower earth. So, His descent is affirming His coming from heaven, it's not suggesting that He descended from earth to hell. Descending from heaven to earth is expressed as descending to the lower parts.

1 Peter 3:18-20, ***“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.”*** Christ making proclamation to the spirits now in prison refer to the many who were disobedient in the days of Noah. Those masses of people who died in the flood, are now in bondage (i.e. hell). This passage is saying that, in their days, during their life in the time of Noah, the Lord spoke to them, revealing Himself to them through the preaching of Noah, yet those people wouldn’t turn in faith, and only eight were delivered from the flood. Those who rejected the Lord then, remain in bondage to this day, and forever more. This doesn’t mean Christ went to hell after He died to proclaim His victory. Besides, what value would it be for Christ to preach in hell? Everyone in hell already knows that Jesus is God and that He is victorious. There’s nobody in hell who doesn’t understand that they’re there for rejecting the Lord. So, going to hell to state the obvious seems pointless. Additionally, proclaiming His victory can’t bring about any repentance or reconciliation for anyone in hell, so what’s the point of preaching in hell? Nobody in hell can repent and be moved to heaven. Lastly, when Christ was on the cross, He gives us a clear statement as to where He’s going when He dies. He tells a repentant thief on another cross next to Him, “Today you will be with Me in paradise.” I can’t see hell being called paradise and I believe both Jesus and the repentant thief passed from death into heaven, in an instant. For these reasons, I think the Apostles Creed has it wrong when it declares, *“He descended into hell.”* That man-made creed should be altered.