

The Intermediate State: Purgatory... Does it exist?

Because the Bible does not say much about what happens to one's soul upon death, there is considerable confusion and debate on the question of an intermediate state. The intermediate state is defined as the time between a person's physical death and resurrection. Is there a place that a Christian's soul goes to for a period of time before going on to heaven?

A very common belief of the intermediate state is **Purgatory**. Purgatory (from the Latin term "purgare") means "make clean or to purify". According to Roman Catholic tradition, this is the place where the souls of Believers go to be further purified from sin. Considered necessary for Roman Catholics as part of the sanctification process, its purpose is to make one holy and acceptable to the Lord upon entering heaven.

To understand this further, it is necessary to recognize that Roman Catholic teaching divides the concept of sin into two categories: greater sins (mortal sins) and lesser sins (venial sins).

Mortal sins are sins that deprive one of a spiritual life and have the consequence of eternal damnation of the soul.

Forgiveness of this type of sin is possible through penance; however, in failing to do so, one's soul is cast off into eternal damnation from God.

Venial sins are sins that are ones committed without earnest intention or of slight offense to God and do not have the consequence of depriving one of a spiritual life.

While there is no obligation to confess venial sins, pardon can be sought through penance, mass or purgatory.

Penance, also known as "satisfaction", is the required punishment determined by the ordained priest at the time of absolution. The whole process of repentance and receiving penance is commonly known as "confession"; it is where a Roman Catholic Believer presents himself to an ordained priest, accuse himself of his sins and repent with true sorrow. The priest, who has the power to forgive sins, absolves or remits the eternal guilt and penalty of that particular sin, but determines the temporal punishment (satisfaction).

The purpose of satisfaction is to take away something from the repented Roman Catholic sinner for the honor of God. Penance typically come in three forms: 1) financial (depriving oneself of the goods of fortune), 2) fasting (depriving oneself of the goods of the body) or 3) prayer (depriving oneself of the goods of the soul).

Failing to do penance in this present life means that satisfaction will be fulfilled in purgatory.

While priests, as human beings alone cannot forgive sins, Roman Catholics believe that God can use qualified priests as instruments to forgive and remit sins.

Mass, also known as "celebration of the Eucharist" or "communion", is not only a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, but also of petition and appeasement. During Mass, Roman Catholic Believers may seek the mercy of God and to appease Him with their temporal punishments. In a similar fashion, a Roman Catholic Believer may request a Memorial Mass for the Dead, which is a Mass for the benefit of someone in purgatory (this is the primary motive for the Roman Catholic practice of praying for the dead).

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Purgatory is the final stage of sanctification, and Roman Catholic Believers believe that it involves suffering. While it is debated, many see purgatory as a real fire, and the punishment may last for thousands of years. It is understood to be Christ applying the purifying redemption that He accomplished on the cross.

Inadequate penance or unrepentant venial sins contaminate the Roman Catholic Believer, which are obstacles that prevent his soul from coming into the presence of God; thus, he requires purgatory.

With the exception of the great saints, all Roman Catholic Believers will spend time in purgatory.

Does the doctrine of purgatory arise from the biblical text?

Roman Catholic Believers appeal to two biblical passages and one extra-biblical source as the foundation for purgatory.

1 Peter 3:19 – Roman Catholics use this text as proof that the Bible speaks of more than just two places, heaven or hell, that a soul may go to. Roman Catholics contend that there is at least a third place, a temporary intermediate state called the “Limbo of the Fathers.” They believe that this is where the souls of Old Testament Believers who died before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were temporarily held. After His resurrection, they contend that Jesus visited these Old Testament Believers to preach the good news that heaven is now open to them. While Roman Catholics debate whether this is the same as purgatory, they see this verse as a precedent.

However, the Roman Catholic hermeneutics of 1 Peter 3:19 fails to take into account the context of the passage and letter of 1 Peter (see the article “Understanding 1 Peter 3:18-20... When Jesus was crucified, did He go to Hell?”). Furthermore the Bible speaks of at least three Old Testament Believers that went to heaven (Gen 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11; Matt 17:3). To learn more about this, see the article “What happens to the spirit or soul when people die?”

1 Corinthians 3:15 – Roman Catholics use this text, “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” as proof of purgatory.

However, Roman Catholic hermeneutics is again suspect as the context of 1 Corinthians 3:15 is in reference to the works of Believers being judged and tested by fire. The passage is not about the burning or punishment of the soul of a human being (see the article “The risk of carnal Christians... destruction of the church”).

2 Maccabees 12:42-45 – This Apocryphal extrabiblical source is the principle proof text used by Roman Catholics that supports the doctrine of purgatory, prayer for the dead, and making an offering to God for the purpose of delivering the dead from the punishment of their sin.

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However, there are several problems with the citation of this text.

When the passage is viewed in context, the dead are non-Believers, and Roman Catholics do not view idolatry as a sin that can be forgiven.

“But under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear. So it was clear to all that this was why these men had been slain. They all therefore praised the ways of the Lord, the just judge who brings to light the things that are hidden.” (2 Maccabees 12:40-41)

The proof text clearly contradicts the Bible as 2 Maccabees 12 indicates that a human being (Judas) can pray for dead non-Believers, sacrifice for them and atone for their sin of idolatry!

For good reasons, the Apocrypha is not accepted as authoritative and not included in the Scriptures.

The Bible is unequivocal and clear; there is no such intermediate state as purgatory. The doctrine of purgatory is an example of where Roman Catholic tradition is held in higher esteem than the Bible.