

Ask Fr James

What is the evidence of the Doctrine of Purgatory in the Bible?

The question that the doctrine of purgatory speaks to is: what happens to good Christians who did not have their sins forgiven before death? This question is relevant because it is clear from scriptures that: No one can enter into the presence of God without "clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm. 24:4) and in I Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul says: "the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God" and Revelation 21:27 says nothing unclean shall enter [heaven]." So who gets to go to hell and who gets to go to purgatory?

Jesus clarifies that: "that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a **severe beating**. But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a **light beating** (Luke 12: 47-48). Catholics interpret "**severe beating**" as meaning "**hell**" and "**light beating**" as "purgatory," an abstract state of existence where the soul undergoes ameliorative suffering.

Christians who have died and who need to be purged would undergo purgation in the interim. Purgatory is a place of purification, where those who die in a state of grace and without mortal sin, but with venial sin, undergo purification and expiate their sins. After this purification they are able to enjoy the Blessed Trinity, face to face, which would otherwise not be possible were they to be still tainted by sin.

The doctrine of Purgatory has strong biblical roots in 2 Maccabees 12:43-46 and was referenced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: *All who die in God's grace, 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* (CCC # 1030). We pray and offer Masses for them to be released fully into the joys of heaven and they too pray for us that we may keep up the faith so as to gain salvation.

In the Apostles creed we profess the "Descent into Hell " which means Christ's victory on the cross reaches and permeates the entire cosmos, which includes hell where Jesus went to free the souls of the un-evangelized non-Christians and some good Christians who died without having all their sins forgiven. The Catechism says: 'Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him' (CCC #633).

There are several popular misunderstandings of purgatory that are embedded in popular culture. It is important to note that purgatory is not a rest stop along the way to heaven but it is a 'cleansing process' where Christ continues his work of burning 'away the dross from our souls.' There is no reason to fear that Christians in purgatory will not eventually make heaven to be with the Lord. Indeed, St. Thomas Aquinas assures us of the constant and consoling presence of the Holy Spirit in purgatory.

In summary then, purgatory is the paying of a debt which we owe for our sin. No sinner will go unpunished (Proverbs 11:21 and Revelation 21:27). When we repent, God remits the eternal punishment which is our due, but there remains a temporal punishment which must be paid off by penitential practices - in purgatory. Purgatory is a purification process, as the completion of the uncompleted process of sanctification that takes place in this life. That we need to offer God satisfaction for sins committed after baptism.