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IS PURGATORY A BIBLICAL CONCEPT?

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The doctrine of purgatory remains a troubling idea for many Roman Catholics. One bulletin from a local Catholic church included the following: “Why do we pray for souls in Purgatory? When we die in God’s friendship, we know that we’ll eventually go to heaven. However, if we haven’t properly atoned for certain sins, we have to be purified in Purgatory first. The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls it, ‘a final cleansing of human imperfections before one is able to enter the joy of heaven.’ We pray for the souls in Purgatory, especially during the month of November, to help them pass through to heaven faster than they would on their own.”

Some Catholics question this doctrine, and more than a few challenge its legitimacy, based on their understanding of Scripture. At the Web site www.catholic.com, a site devoted to “Catholic answers, Catholic apologetics, and Catholic evangelism,” Christine Pinheiro and Kenneth Howell defend the Catholic doctrine of 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.”

Four False Ideas. The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is covered in the Catechism of the Catholic Church in just three paragraphs on two pages (paragraphs 1030–32; pp. 268–69). The concepts that have necessitated the doctrine of purgatory, however, are found throughout Catholic dogma. The idea of purgatory grows out of four mistaken ideas about man, sin, and salvation.

First, Catholic theology does not accept the final and full sufficiency of Christ’s once-for-all atonement (1 Pet. 3:18). The Catholic soteriological system is fraught with ideas of self-atonement—works that must be done to merit forgiveness for past sins. Purgatory allows for those meritorious efforts (i.e. suffering) to atone for sin after death.

Second, Catholic doctrine teaches an unbiblical idea of penalty and guilt. It holds that “absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused…he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or ‘expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’” Purgatory is the final act of penance that removes the penalty of sin.

Third, Catholic doctrine distorts the biblical concept of grace by adding human merit to it: “Moved by the Holy Spirit and charity, we can merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.” Purgatory helps to earn enough merit, over time, to overcome the punishment of God.

Fourth, Roman Catholic theology confuses the biblical doctrine of judgment. It teaches that judgments after death include a remedial judgment that sends some people to purgatory, and a final judgment that occurs at the second coming of Christ.

These four notions of self-atonement, penance, merit, and remedial judgment run contrary to the teaching of the New Testament, and they cause the gospel message to pass through a distorted grid that leads only to defective interpretation and understanding of Scripture. There are four key passages in which this occurs.
First Corinthians 3:13–14 and the Idea of Purification. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:13–14, makes this statement: “Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” Paul’s statements are clear. It is the man’s works that are being judged, not his person or soul. The issue at stake is not his salvation or eternal state (heaven or hell), but his rewards. The fire of Christ’s judgment will test the nature of his earthly works; this judgment does nothing to the sanctification of his soul. In fact, Paul makes it very clear that though his rewards may be lost, yet “he himself will be saved.” When Paul mentions “the Day,” he refers to “the Day of the Lord”: the day of the return of Christ and the final judgment of the living and the dead. Verse 14 simply amplifies and explains verse 13.

Paul’s point is obvious: not all Christian ministers (or saints) will receive the same reward. The final judgment will test the nature of our life’s work. Some men’s work will prove to be as pure as gold, silver, or precious jewels and will be greatly rewarded. Other Christians will do little with their lives, and their works will be like wood, hay, and straw—consumed by Christ’s fiery judgment. The person who has trusted in Christ, however, will be saved and brought through the fire of judgment because of his faith in Christ. Some will have greater rewards, some will have lesser rewards, but the works of a man do not determine if he goes to heaven or hell. Faith in Christ (or not) seals a person’s eternal destiny. David Prior summarizes well what Paul is saying: “These verses in 1 Corinthians 3 urge us to take with full seriousness both the certainty of eternal life and the scrutiny which the Lord will bring to our daily service as Christians.”

Second Maccabees 12:39–46 and Prayers for the Dead. This passage from the Apocrypha says nothing about purgatory. It is merely the interpretation of the writer concerning a bizarre incident. A closer reading of this text indicates four things. First, Second Maccabees makes no direct reference to purgatory. Second, the passage is self-contradictory and inconsistent. It states that these dead “had gone to rest in godliness” (v. 45), but then it tells us that these dead warriors were idolaters, killed by God due to their idolatry. Third, there is nothing in the law of Moses that comes close to advocating prayers for the dead. What we find in Second Maccabees and the rabbinical writings surrounding these events are the syncretistic merging of pagan ideas with Israelite religion. Fourth, the Apocrypha, while useful for background information, is full of historical inaccuracies, myth, superstition, and ideas contrary to the rest of Scripture. The anonymous author of Second Maccabees does not purport to speak for God, but rather merely to condense some five volumes of a man named Jason of Cyrene (2 Macc. 3:23). We cannot and should not look to Second Maccabees for Scripture-based doctrines.

First Peter 3:18–22 and the Idea of Post-Death Probation. What Peter sets forth in this passage is not Jesus Christ going to purgatory or hell to preach to people in order to help them get to heaven. Peter simply states that the crucified and dead Christ was raised by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit by whom Noah preached to the people of his day prior to the flood “long ago” (v. 20). Those souls now in prison (hell) are there because they refused to heed Noah’s call to repentance and faith. Christ is compared to the ark of Noah—if people enter into Christ by faith and baptism, they will be saved from God’s final judgment just as Noah and his family were saved from the flood by faith and the ark. “The passage describes no second chance for repentance after death. Even less does it promise universal salvation.”

Matthew 12:32 and Salvation after Death. Finally, when Jesus says that those guilty of the sin of blasphemy of the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven “either in this age or in the age to come,” Christ is not pointing to purgatory. Our Catholic friends are incorrect to say that “this suggests that there are some sins that will be forgiven in the age to come. If there is no purification after death, then this passage doesn’t make sense.” To the contrary, Christ’s statement makes perfectly clear sense, and the introduction of the concept of purgatory merely confuses the plain meaning of Scripture. Leon Morris interprets the passage easily: “This does not, of course, mean that some of those who are not forgiven in
this world may hope for forgiveness after death. Such a possibility is not contemplated. The meaning is something like ‘neither in time nor eternity; never!’”

The Laws of Hermeneutics. The interpretation of Scripture (called hermeneutics) is built on three preliminary laws. The first is this: Scripture interprets Scripture, called “the rule of analogy.” The second law of hermeneutics is this: The plain meaning of Scripture is usually the true meaning. The third rule is this: Simple passages of Scripture help explain complex passages of Scripture—the simple informs the complicated.

Roman Catholic hermeneutics concerning supposed proof texts for purgatory violate all of these laws of hermeneutics. There is no clear, plain, and simple text about purgatory, as there is about both heaven and hell. The Apocrypha cannot be placed equal to inspired Scripture. The Bible plainly speaks about life, death, and judgment: “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). We live, we die, we are judged, we go to heaven or hell; and when Christ comes a second time the final judgment, final hell and final heaven arrive. There is no mention of postmortem purgation at all.

Purgatory is an extrabiblical idea, imported into the church in the Middle Ages—a product of tradition but not Scripture. And the Catholic efforts at grasping for hermeneutical straws to support this false belief—“fire,” “the age to come,” “souls in prison”—betray a lack of clear, precise, and biblical evidence for that place called purgatory.

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NOTES
1. Quote taken from a weekly Sunday bulletin of the Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church in Columbus, Ohio.
4. Ibid., 366.
5. Ibid., 486.
6. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.