

## **Purgatory a Brief Explanation**

By Steve Ray

Dear Protestant Friend:

I will try to answer your questions on Purgatory in a very brief manner. It is not a complicated matter though many Protestants have tried to make it so over the last few centuries. Actually Purgatory is something that was believed by early Church and the Apostles. One needs only study the early writings to find that Protestant theology opposed to Purgatory is of very recent origins. Purgatory simply means “purging” and refers to the final purging of sin and self-love before we are face to face with God (see my story [The Last Nightmare](#)).

### **Purgatory in General:**

You asked about the number of days in Purgatory. First, I thought I would add this simple paragraph from the Catechism which gives an excellent definition 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” (CCC 1030).

It then follows: “The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned....The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture, speaks of a cleansing fire (quoting St. Gregory the Great and Matthew 12:31): “As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgement, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offences can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come” (CCC 1031).

Hebrews 12:14 gives a clear biblical basis as to why final sanctification is necessary. It says, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (NIV). Now, is this the “holiness” we receive by “faith alone”? If so, why is the writer of Hebrews telling these believers that they must attain to a degree of holiness in order to see the Lord? Forgiveness of sins is one thing; becoming actually holy is quite another.

### **About Days In Purgatory:**

There are not any “days” in purgatory, and never have been, even though many Protestants claim Catholics teach this. The “days” referred to are days spent on earth doing some penance that was formerly prescribed, like say, wearing sackcloth, etc.; the indulgence granted was formerly expressed in days, like an “indulgence of 300 days”. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Neither the nature nor the duration of purgatory is specified in Catholic doctrine; however, the existence of purgatory is a dogma of the

Faith” (Rev. Peter Stravinskas, *Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Dictionary*).

One thing that needs to be understood is that the Church has no jurisdiction over souls in purgatory, only over those on earth. And, the Church has been given no further revelation on the details of Purgatory. It is something alluded to in Scripture, so we know it exists, but as to what it actually is, we have not been told. Some theologians have tried to describe it as a “place” and “period of time” but in reality we do not know any details. So the church does not say that Purgatory involves the same kind of time as we experience here on earth (knowing there are different kinds of “time” such as earthly time, eternity, etc.), or even time at all. Cardinal Ratzinger,, a very trustworthy theologian, says that Purgatory may involve “existential” rather than “temporal” duration. It may be someone “experiences”, but experiences in a moment, rather than something that endures over time.”

Purgatory is simply the final stages of sanctification. An Evangelical friend recently admitted that he felt a person had to be actually *become* righteous (not just “declared” righteous) in order to stand before God and his holiness. I asked him if he was righteous enough right now--so that if I swerved and our car hit a tree he would be ready to look God in the eye. He said “No”. He then commented that it made him think Purgatory might be a real possibility. He’s right.

Purgatory is the final stage of sanctification. Evangelical Protestants believe in sanctification though it is usually very nebulous and uncertain exactly what that means. What makes one think that death somehow makes them instantly holy, sanctified, even though they may have approached death full of self-love, evil thoughts, greed, and fear? Purgatory is the final stage of sanctification, the sanctification without which no one will see God (Heb 12:14). “And nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 21:27).

St. Paul tells us, “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life” (Rom 6:22). Sanctification follows the forgiveness of sins. The result of this sanctification (becoming holy) is eternal life. The writer of Hebrews tells us how this sanctification comes about: “For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness” (Heb 12:10). If the process of sanctification is incomplete on the earth, if we still are full of self-love and disordered desires, God in His mercy continues the process after death to prepare us for his glorious presence. (Again, my story [The Last Nightmare](#)).

I will close this brief explanation by using the illustration that helped me understand Purgatory as I came into the Church. In my younger days, I once hitchhiked around Europe for a week, leaving my wife and family in our chalet in Switzerland. To save

money and time, I slept on trains, didn't take showers, etc. When I returned a week later, unshaved, grizzly, and dirty, my wife refused to let me in the chalet. Now wait a minute: I was her husband, I was part of the family, I belonged in that house! Yet, I was not clean or "holy" enough to enter. It is the same for heaven.

So my wife made me undress and take a sponge bath on the porch before I could step in the door. I was part of the family but I had to have a final cleaning up before I was allowed into the full joy of the home. Jesus told His disciples that "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean" (Jn 13:10). Purgatory is simply the final stage of sanctification.

Purgatory is the Front Porch of Heaven!

For more information, check out the following sites:

[James Akin on Purgatory,](#)

[multiple websites,](#)

[Catholic Answers,](#)

[Patrick Madrid's Purgatory: God's Emergency Room for Sinners.](#)