
FAQ

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Heaven, prayer covering offered by deceased loved ones

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

Do you think that the righteous in Heaven offer prayer covering for those of us who are on Earth?

When dear Believers have experienced the loss, in particular a tragic or unexpected loss, of a loved one—it is only natural to think that the deceased has gone to Heaven to advocate for some kind of special protection for survivors on Earth. We have often heard from those who have lost family members or close friends how they say how the deceased are presently in Heaven offering some kind of “prayer covering” on behalf of those they left behind. When outsiders familiar with religious history hear these kinds of remarks, it may make them think about Homeric mythology, and about the descent of Odysseus into Hades (*The Odyssey* Book 11), where he encounters his father and mother and they advise him on Earthly life.¹ Such a view might also cause one to think about various kinds of Roman Catholic rituals where prayers for the dead exiting purgatory are issued, or even just outright occultic séances where people on Earth try to communicate with the dead.

In the Roman Catholic context, survivors on Earth are to offer prayers on behalf of the deceased in purgatory, to see that their final sins are purged from them and they can be allowed into Heaven. The significant problem with this, as rightly noted by Bruce Milne, is how it “seriously compromises the sufficiency of the sole mediation of the Lord Jesus.”² Similarly, the righteous deceased in Heaven offering prayers for their loved ones on Earth might be understood as a kind of reverse purgatorial prayer. What happens to the final victory of the Messiah? Should not Believers on Earth themselves entreat the Father in the name of His Son to mediate before the throne (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 12:24)? Why would we need any deceased relative or friend in Heaven to offer a prayer on our behalf? *Is the Messiah’s mediation not enough?*

At the very most, we might be led to pray for our deceased loved ones in some way in the immediate period of grief following their death. N.T. Wright thinks that it is acceptable to pray that the righteous dead “will be refreshed and filled with God’s joy and peace,” and how “Love passes into prayer; we still love them; why not hold them, in that love, before God?”³ The traditional Jewish and Christian funeral liturgies one finds certainly include words of comfort, communicating to survivors that faithful loved ones are now at rest in a better setting. Born again Believers who have lost someone should have every valid reason in their period of intense pain to entreat the Lord on behalf of the deceased, that a departed loved one has truly entered into a realm where he or she cannot be touched by physical suffering and hardship any more.

Those of us who affirm the reality of an intermediate afterlife in Heaven for deceased Believers, prior to the resurrection, can infer three important things about those who go to Heaven:

¹ Homer: *The Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), pp 168-184.

² Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 171.

³ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 172.

1. The deceased holy ones are in a place of Paradise and refreshment (Luke 23:43).
2. The deceased holy ones have learned more about the wider universe and dimensions of God's wider Creation, simply via the process of going to Heaven.
3. The deceased holy ones are involved in some kind of ongoing or regular worship before God (Hebrews 12:23).
4. Many of the deceased holy ones, specifically martyrs, are actively entreating the throne of God to continue His plan of salvation history (Revelation 6:9-10).

Given the fact that there are persons in Heaven crying out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10, NASU), then it does seem likely that many of our departed loved ones are involved in some kind of preparatory activity in anticipation of the Second Coming. In Wright's estimation, "there is every reason to suppose that they are at least, like the souls under the altar in Revelation, urging the Father to complete the work of justice and salvation in the world."⁴ They will, after all, be among the mixed company of those who return to the Earth at the *parousia* (1 Thessalonians 3:13; cf. Zechariah 14:5).

This, however, involves many things that Believers alive today on Earth are not to specifically know about—given the fact that Paul was not permitted to state what he saw or heard going on in Paradise (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). The Revelation 6:10 question finds a notable parallel in the Disciples' own word to Yeshua, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6, NASU). As beneficial as a disembodied state in Heaven might be, as one will find himself in the presence of the Messiah Himself—true fulfillment for either the departed saint *or* any of us alive today (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:17), will only be found when He returns, the dead are resurrected, and we all see His Kingdom on Earth made manifest. The deceased in Heaven are most eager to see salvation history progress forward. *They by no means want to remain disembodied forever.*

While it is tempting for survivors to think that their departed loved ones are in Heaven offering up prayers on their behalf, there is no evidence in the Bible that the deceased actually do this. Wright concurs, "I do not...find in the New Testament or in the earliest Christian fathers any suggestion that those at present in heaven or (if you prefer) paradise are actively engaged in praying *for* those of us in the present life,"⁵ and he urges much caution in trying to speculate on what they might be involved in. Whatever the departed saints in Heaven are actually doing, it is something **that is largely off limits** for those of us on Earth to know—and Scripture explicitly prohibits us from trying to communicate with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:11). We need to have the assurance ourselves, *personally*, that we are diligent in our own praying to God—not trying to rely on deceased loved ones who are likely involved in things beyond our comprehension:

"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16, NASU).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.