

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

“sheol”

Key question

What happens to a person at death?

Key text

II Corinthians 5:8

“we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

Key Definition

Intermediate state

The intermediate state is the place or abode of the human soul after physical death and before the resurrection of the body at the second coming of Christ.

Introduction

1. What happens to a person’s body and soul between the time of death and the final resurrection?
 - a. The aspiration for eternal life is strong in all cultures and ages. This is seen in our striving to prolong life, our heroic efforts to slow aging or freeze bodies with the hope that a future technology will be able to bring the body back.
 - b. In many cultures the importance of preserving one’s name and heritage is a form of the impulse toward eternal life.
 - c. Our fascination with near-death experiences illustrates our deep interest in what happens after death.
2. Key scripture texts
 - a. **Luke 16:19-31** “19 Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. 20 And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, 21 and longing to be fed with the {crumbs} which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. 22 Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died

and was buried. ²³ And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame." ²⁵ But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and {that} none may cross over from there to us." ²⁷ And he said, "Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house-- ²⁸ for I have five brothers-- that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." ²⁹ But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." ³⁰ But he said, "No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" ³¹ But he said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead."

- b. **Phil.1:12-24** "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose, But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for this is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake."
- c. **II Cor.5:8** "we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord."
- d. **I Cor.15:50-53** "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality."

A. A summary of what the Bible seems to most clearly teach.

- 1. At physical death.
 - a. The bodies of both believers and unbelievers go to the grave (earth).
 - b. The souls of believers and unbelievers in the Old Testament Dispensation (before the resurrection of Christ) go to "Sheol" (a Hebrew word meaning the unseen world) Ps. 9:17, 16:10; Lk.16:19-31, (Enoch 22:1-14)
 - 1. For believers it is "Paradise" (after Christ's resurrection) or "Abraham's bosom" (before Christ's resurrection)."
 - 2. For unbelievers it is described with the Greek word "Hades" (often wrongly translated "hell") a place of torment.
 - 3. When Christ rose from the grave:
 - a) He brought Abraham's bosom with Him to "Paradise." **Eph.4:8-10** "⁸ Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men." ⁹ (Now this {expression,} "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)"

- b) He stood at the right hand of God. **Acts 7:55** “But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” This means that today, when a believer dies, he or she goes to be with the Lord in heaven (Paradise), which is distinct from the yet to be formed “new heaven and earth” which will accommodate our resurrected bodies.
2. At the second coming of Christ.
 - a. In the first resurrection the believer’s bodies are raised and united with their souls to pass on into the new heaven and earth.
 - b. In the second resurrection the unbeliever’s bodies are resurrected and united with their souls to face the great white throne for judgment and pass into the lake of fire (hell).

B. Three inadequate views.

- b. **Soul sleep** - the soul is in a state of unconsciousness after death and before the resurrection of the body at the second coming. (Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other sects)
 1. Support
 - a. The Scripture describes the death of a believer as “sleep” Acts 7:60, 13:36, I Cor.15:6,18,20,51; I Thess.4:13-15; Jn.11:11,14.
 - b. Human existence demands the unity of soul and body. The absence of the body must mean the dysfunction of the soul.
 - c. A state of consciousness between death and resurrection, characterized by bliss or woe, unwarrantedly anticipates the judgment verdict of the last day.
 2. Problems
 - a. There are several biblical references to personal, conscious existence between death and resurrection. Lk.16:19-31; 23:43; Acts 7:59; Phil.1:23; II Cor.5:8; Heb.12:23; Rev.6:9-11.
 - b. The references to death as sleep simply refer to the cessation of physical life. Matt.27:52; Jn.11:11; Acts 13:36
 - c. If the third argument (above) is valid, then there can be no joy of salvation in this life as well, but note Jn.5:24; Phil.1:28.
- c. **Purgatory** - is a place or state of temporal punishment in the next world. The word “Purgatory” means cleansing; in purgatory we are cleansed from our venial sins and the punishment due for all our other forgiven sins. One does not remain in purgatory forever as one might in hell. After the soul is cleansed in purgatory, the person goes to heaven.
 1. In the Roman Catholic understanding of justification as spiritual perfection IN a person’s life (not FOR a person by Christ) there is a practical need for a place in which this takes place after death because few people are perfect at death. This is a place where believers are punished for “venial” sins.
 2. **Limbus patrum** - the now empty place of OT saints awaiting Christ’s resurrection.
 3. **Limbus infantium** - the place of unbaptized infants.
 4. In Roman Catholicism forgiveness of venial sins can be accomplished in three different ways.

- a. An unconditional forgiveness on God's part. In fact God does not choose to grant this according to RC teaching.
 - b. **Suffering** (purgatory) and the performance of penitential works (mass, prayers and good works by the living on behalf of the dead).
 - c. **Contrition** - outward signs of inner conversion (sack cloth and ashes, fasting, mortification).
5. Biblical texts used for support
- a. **Matt.5:25-26** "you will not come out from it until you have paid the last penny."
 - b. **Matt.12:32** "But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."
 - c. **I Cor.3:15** "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."
 - d. **Heb.9:27** "judgment" determines where a person will go - heaven, hell, or purgatory.
 - e. II Macc. 12:42-46 "sacrifice offered for the sins of the dead."
6. Objections stem from the whole doctrine of justification by faith -
- a. We are saved by grace alone. Gal.3:1-14, Eph.2:8-9
 - b. Matt.5:25 & 12:32 contain metaphors that should not be taken literally in every detail.
 - c. II Maccabees is apocryphal and does not mention purgatory as a place of cleansing.
 - d. Scripture does not speak of a purgatory.
 - e. Double punishment is a contradiction to the cross and grace.
 - f. Christ cleanses us from all sin. I Jn.1:7; Lk.15:11-32; 23:41-43; Heb.10:14.
- d. **Instantaneous Resurrection** (E.D. Davies believed that in II Cor.5 Paul presented a corrected view of the doctrine of the believer's resurrection. At death the believer gets a resurrection body and there is then no need for a final resurrection. This view ignores a lot of Paul's teaching - Phil.3:20-21; I Thess.4:16-17; Rom.2:3-16; I Cor.4:5; II Thess.1:5-2:12; II Tim.4:8.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What is Sheol?
- b. Where do the souls of the believing and unbelieving go at death?
- c. When are the bodies and souls of the believing and unbelieving dead united?
- d. What Scriptures help us understand the intermediate state?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How literally should we take Luke 16:19-31?
- b. What is "soul sleep" and why is it not Biblical?
- c. What happens to a believer's soul at death?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. Is there a problem with the bodies of Christians being cremated after death?
- b. What kind of encouragement can we give from Scripture to those who have lost loved ones to death?