



## The intermediate state

When death intrudes our family circles, it drops a veil of mystery. Many questions surface in our minds. Suddenly we want to know what happens after death. After all, we have been forced to say farewell to a loved one. That moment has been so difficult and so painful. Is death the end? Is there any comfort?

Of course, for the believer who experiences the death of a fellow-believer, these questions are partially and yet visibly answered in spite of the closed coffin which is then lowered into the ground. The Christian burial always and correctly calls attention to the fact that the body is in the grave to await the Day of Resurrection when all bodies shall come forth (John 5:28, 29). For the child of God that day will be abounding with blessing.

But that Day is still in the future. What about our loved one right now? What about that soul between death and the resurrection? The existence of the soul during this time we usually call *the intermediate state* — that which is in between, that which is temporary, that which is incomplete. This term covers both the existence of the believer and the unbeliever during this time. For each, however, this existence is very different.

Precisely where does the soul exist during the period we call *the intermediate state*?

The writers of the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (q. 86) summarized the Biblical teaching concerning the believer after death as being "*communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death...*" *The Heidelberg Catechism* (q. 57) teaches us to confess that "*my soul, after this life, shall immediately be taken up to Christ, its Head.*"

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* further describes this intermediate state for believers as being that

*their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they will be united to their souls.*

That same eighty-sixth question adds a summary of what the Bible teaches about the souls of the wicked after death.

*They are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, and their bodies kept in their graves, as in their prisons, till the resurrection and judgment of the great day.*

In addition to this, *the Westminster Confession of Faith* adds: "*Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none*" (XXXII:1).

Of course, this teaching of the Reformed Churches is supported by Scripture. While it is true that there are other teachings more clearly and fully taught in Scripture, this one is certainly there.

There are three words used in Scripture for the intermediate state, all of which shed light on the nature of this existence of the soul after death. Now, while a consideration of these words may seem very technical and therefore rather unimportant, we cannot ignore them. William Hendriksen tells us that the consideration of these words is very practical since

*certain sects are constantly telling the people that due to a wrong translation of these words ... the doctrine of hell as a place of everlasting punishment has taken such a hold in the church*

*(The Bible on the Life Hereafter, 83)*

Now, the cults are dead wrong, but do we really know what we believe?

The first word that we find used is the Old Testament word *Sheol*. This word translated into English by "pit," "grave" or "hell," appears some sixty-five times. A. A. Hodge writes that it comes from a Hebrew verb meaning "to ask,"

*expressing the sense of our English proverb, that the "grave crieth give, give." It is used in the Old Testament to signify, in a vague and general sense, the state of the departed, both good and the bad, intermediate between death and the resurrection of the righteous (Hosea xiii. 14)...*

*(Outlines of Theology, 551)*

For both the righteous and the wicked, it is the state of death, or the realm of the dead. It is a place (Genesis 37:35; 1 Samuel 2:6), with bars (Job 17:16) and gates (Isaiah 38:10). It is characterized by darkness (Job 17:13). As the state of death, into which all men go, it brings pain to the unbelievers (Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 49:14). On the other hand, for the believer this state of death is full of expectation (Numbers 23:10; Psalm 16:9-11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24-26).

*Sheol* can also mean *grave* (Psalm 141:7). Anthony Hoekema reminds us that this is not necessarily a common use of the word since the Hebrews had another word for grave: *qebhar*. He adds:

*"Many passages in which Sheol could be translated by grave also yield good sense if one renders Sheol as realm of the dead."*

*(The Bible and the Future, 96)*

Further, *Sheol* is apparently the *place of punishment for the wicked*. There are times, therefore, when it can be translated *Hell*. Both Louis Berkhof and William Hendriksen agree that *Sheol* can be so translated, but Anthony Hoekema is much more cautious. Some of the passages usually understood as referring to Hell he shows can be understood another way. However, Psalm 49:14 he indicates, can possibly be correctly understood as referring to *Hell*. To this we add Deuteronomy 32:22 where we learn that *Sheol* is the place of God's burning wrath.

The New Testament speaks of *Hades* eleven different times. Once it is translated *grave* (1 Corinthians 15:55) and the other times it is translated *Hell*. Again, however, there are different ways of understanding this word, just as with the Old Testament word *Sheol*. Its common meaning is *the realm of the dead* (Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13). In two places *Hades* is seen sharply contrasted to Heaven (Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15). Besides, when you read Matthew 11:23 and 24 it becomes very clear that Hades is a place of judgment. The same becomes clear in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). There, *Hades* is contrasted to Abraham's Bosom, a place of happy existence.

There is one more word used in the New Testament to describe the intermediate state. In 2 Peter 2:4, we read of *Hell* or *Tartarus*. This is the only time this word is used. Verse 9 tells us that this is the place of punishment for the wicked during the time between death and the general resurrection of the last day. Thus it is that Jude 7 can indicate that Sodom and Gomorrah along with nearby cities are now *"suffering the punishment of eternal fire."*

What do we learn from these three words?

1. During the intermediate state both the righteous and the wicked continue to exist.
2. For the wicked it is a time of torment as they are held in the clutches of death. It is Hell!
3. For the righteous in Christ it is a time of joyful expectation, awaiting the day of the resurrection.

About this time of joyful expectation the Bible has more to say. We are told that for the believer to be absent from the body is *"to be at home with the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 5:8). This can be our comfort because while Jesus was on the cross He said to the penitent thief, *"Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43). Because of what Jesus would do on that cross, believers would know death as the doorway to being *"at home with the Lord."* Is it any wonder, then, that Paul, writing about life and death, could say, *"But I am in a strait betwixt the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ; for it is very far better: yet to abide in the flesh is more needful for your sake"* (Philippians 1:23). See also Acts 7:59.

Hendriksen writes: *Never can it be emphasized strongly enough that the redeemed in heaven between the moment of death and that of the bodily resurrection have not yet attained to ultimate glory. They are living in what is generally called "the intermediate" state, not yet the final state. Though, to be sure, they are serenely happy, their happiness is not yet complete.*

(*The Bible on the Life Hereafter*, 58)

The intermediate state and the final state are not two distinct experiences, however. There is a continuity between them. Therefore, what Scripture says about the final state can also be applied legitimately to the intermediate state, if we keep in mind its incompleteness. Thus, the beautiful picture of the church translated to glory which we have in Revelation 7:9-17 gives us only a glimpse — but a glimpse at that — of glory. It is a picture of deliverance from trials, cares, hardship. It is life — eternal life, and the unblemished joy of salvation.

How, then, do the intermediate and final states differ?

1. Those enjoying the intermediate state with the Lord are *limited* to heaven. They do not yet inhabit the full inheritance. They know heaven and its joys, but not the new earth.
2. They are *limited* because they do not inhabit the body. The body is part of being man. They now await this body in its glorified form in the Resurrection.
3. Their joy is *limited* (though they do not realize it) because the full body of believers is not yet together. For there to be unlimited joy and blessing the whole church, the whole Body of Christ, must be together (Hebrews 11:40).

Nevertheless, of the saints with the Lord, it can right now be said that they know rest (Revelation 14:13).

How beautiful! How comforting! Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. *"Death for the Christian ... is a homecoming. It is the end of his pilgrimage ..."* (Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 108). Think of it! Nothing — not even death — can *"separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:39)!

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