

The End Times
Our Hope & God's Promise
Part One

**Individual Eschatology:
Death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection, and Judgment**

("Let us consider this settled," said Calvin, "that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection" [*Institutes*, 3.10.5].)

Biblical eschatology is a vast field of study encompassing far more than merely "end-time" events, or what we customarily speak of as "prophecy". Also included within the discipline of eschatology is the destiny of the individual, most often conceived as entailing 4 phases or experiences: (1) physical death, (2) the intermediate state, (3) the bodily resurrection, and (4) the judgment of the believer.

Physical Death

The word "death" is used in Scripture to describe three experiences: (1) spiritual death, or the separation or alienation of the individual soul from God (cf. Gen. 2:17; 3:3,8-9; Eph. 2:1,5); (2) eternal death or second death, which is the culmination or eternal continuation of spiritual death (cf. Rev. 2:11; 20:6,14; 21:8); and (3) physical death which is the temporary separation of the material and immaterial aspects of the human constitution (cf. Gen. 35:18; James 2:26; Phil. 1:21-24; 2 Cor. 5:1-8, I Cor. 15:35-58). Insofar as this study concerns the destiny of individual Christians, those who have been saved from spiritual death, we will focus only on (3) physical death.

The Character and Cause of Physical Death

The *character* of physical death, or, *what* is it?

- The absence of clinically detectable signs such as the heart stopping and the decrease of blood pressure and body temperature?
- The absence of brain wave activity?
- The irreversible loss of vital functions?
- The Scriptures answer the question spiritually, not clinically. We are told that physical death is the dissolution of the unity between material and immaterial aspects of the human person (in 2 Cor. 5:1 Paul simply describes death as the destruction or loss of our "earthly house", i.e., the loss or cessation of "corporeal"/"bodily" existence).

The *cause* of physical death, or, *why* does it happen?

- Immediately - note the options listed above
- Proximately - sin and guilt (Rom. 5:12)
- Ultimately - God (Mt. 10:28; Acts 17:28)

The Intermediate State

The Intermediate State refers to that period and/or experience of the individual between the time of physical death and bodily resurrection. The *biblical evidence* for it is found primarily, but not exclusively, in these texts: 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-24, Luke 16:19-31; Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 6:9-11 (and 20:1-6).

We must first examine 2 Corinthians 5:1-5. In these verses Paul speaks of his desire to be alive when Christ returns, for then he would not have to die physically and experience the separation of body and spirit, a condition he refers to as being “naked” or “unclothed”. Paul’s perspective on life and death may therefore be put in this way:

- It is *good* to remain alive on this earth to serve Christ (Phil. 1:21a,22a,24-26).
- On the other hand, it is *better* to die physically and enter into the presence of Christ (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21b,23).
- However, it is by far and away *best* to be alive when Christ returns, for then we avoid death altogether and are immediately joined with the Lord in our resurrected and glorified bodies.

According to v. 3, if he remains alive until Christ returns he will be found by the Lord clothed with a body (the present, earthly one), and not in a disembodied state. To be without a body is to be “naked”. Clearly, Paul envisaged a state of disembodiment between physical death and the general resurrection (cf. “unclothed” in v. 4). v. 4 is simply an expanded repetition of v. 2.

In v. 5 Paul speaks of our unfailing assurance. “From this it becomes apparent that ‘the earnest of the Spirit’ is not a mere static deposit, but the active vivifying operation of the Holy Spirit within the believer, assuring him that the same principle of power which effected the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead is also present and at work within him, preparing his mortal body for the consummation of his redemption in the glorification of his body” (Hughes).

Consider **2 Cor. 5:6-8**. Note the contrast set forth in vv. 6 and 8: the contrast is not primarily between two modes of human existence, as if one is in the body and one out of the body (although this is a valid contrast); nor is the contrast primarily that between two possible relationships to the Lord: one with the Lord and one away from the Lord (although again this is valid enough in itself). Paul’s primary contrast is between two successive spheres of Christian residence or existence: now in the body and then with the Lord. The major point, therefore, is that life now in the body is to be followed immediately by life then with Christ.

IN the body = ABSENCE from the Lord
OUT OF the body = PRESENCE with the Lord

As one must be either in or out of his body (for there is no third alternative), so he must either be absent from or present with the Lord (for there is no third alternative). In 5:1-5 Paul has shown that physical death means the loss of bodily existence. Here he explains what this entails for the Christian. There are but two possible modes of existence for us: if we are physically alive and in our bodies we are absent from Christ / if we die physically and leave our bodies we are present with Christ. The two experiences are mutually exclusive. Departure from mortal corporeality marks the beginning of residence with the Lord.

Is the transition immediate? Yes: (1) in v. 6 residence in a physical body is contemporaneous with absence from direct presence with Christ, clearly implying that when the former ceases so also does the latter; (2) note the temporal indicators –“*while* we are in the body, *we are* absent from the Lord;” (3) v.7 has “walking by faith” and “walking by sight” set over against one another as opposites with no interval between them. When death occurs, faith gives way to sight and hope to fulfillment; (4) that physical death of the believer issues immediately in conscious presence with the Lord is the teaching of Paul in Phil. 1:20-24.

To be “at home (*endēmeō*) in the body” = to be in one’s homeland; among one’s own people, “absent (*ekdēmeō*) from the Lord” = to be out of one’s homeland; to be in a foreign country.

V. 7 is designed to soften the blow of v. 6b, or to explain in what sense being “in” the body entails “absence” from Christ. Our absence from Christ is only *spatial*, not *spiritual* (cf. Mt. 28:19-20; Col. 1:27; John 17:23,26). While in the body we do not literally *see* Christ (at least, most of us don’t!), but rather walk by faith in the *physically* absent and *unseen* Lord. Death brings us into spatial proximity and visible contact with Christ. Thus death, rather than severing our spiritual relationship with Christ, heightens and enhances it! Death brings us into the immediate vision of our Savior and the increased intimacy of fellowship which it entails.

Some theological implications:

- What does this mean for the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, which teaches that Christians at death must endure additional purification from sins before entering the bliss of Christ's presence?
- What does this mean for the doctrine of soul sleep, or *psychopannychia*, which says that Christians at death enter a state of complete inactivity and unconsciousness, to be “awakened” at Christ's return? What, then, does the NT mean when it refers to death as “sleep”? See Mt. 27:52; Luke 8:52; Jn. 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6,18; 1 Thess. 4:13.
 - (1) Sleep implies rest from *earthly toil*, the cessation of activity in *this* realm. Thus one is asleep to *this* world, but alive and “awake” in the next.
 - (2) The imagery of sleep is used to describe death because the *body* does sleep, in a manner of speaking. I.e., it is at rest, without activity or life. But nowhere does the Bible say that the “soul” or “spirit” sleeps or is unconscious.
 - (3) Sleep is used to illustrate that the pain of death as a penalty for sin is gone for the Christian. Death for the believer, rather than something to be feared, is like dozing off for a nap. See esp. Luke 16:19-31; Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 12:26-27; Rev. 6:9-11.
- What, if any, application do these verses have for so-called “out-of-the-body” experiences?

The intermediate state for the Christian is immediate transition upon death into the presence of Christ during which time we experience holiness (no longer being at war with the flesh, although final glorification awaits the resurrection), happiness, a heightened sense of consciousness, and knowledge of Christ in its fullest. For the non-Christians a heightened sense of consciousness, but one of torment, agony, irreversible separation from Christ (Luke 16).

The Bodily Resurrection

1. *Its Certainty: The Resurrection of Christ* - John 11:25-26; 14:1-3; Rom. 6:4-11; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15; 2 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:10-11,21; Col. 2:12; 3:4; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Rev. 1:18.
2. *Its Character* (2 Cor. 5:1-5) - Paul likens physical death, the dissolution of the body, to the dismantling of a tent. But death should not lead to despair, for “we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” What is the “building from God”? Several options have been suggested:

Heaven - more specifically, an abode in heaven (cf. Jn. 14:1-3); perhaps even *the New Jerusalem*.

Intermediate body - not the glorified body to be received at Christ's coming, but a state of bodily existence nevertheless: not corrupt and yet not glorified, not fleshly and yet not wholly spiritual; i.e., a bodily form of some sort suitable to the intermediate state but different from and only preparatory to the final, glorified, resurrected body (Mt. 17:3; Rev. 6:9-11).

Some say this refers to **the body of Christ, i.e., the church**.

Resurrected/glorified body - this is the most feasible answer. (a) “house” in v. 1a refers to this earthly body we presently have; sound exegesis would lead us to take “house” in v. 1b to refer to the heavenly future body; (b) note its description: “not made with hands” = spiritual (cf. 1 Cor. 15:44,48,49); it is “eternal” as opposed to the temporary and transient character of earthly body; it is “in the heavens” as opposed to “on the earth” (v. 1a).

The major objection to this view is Paul's use of the *present tense*, “we have” (not “we *shall* have”). This seems to imply that immediately upon death the believer receives his/her glorified body. But this would conflict with 1 Cor. 15:22ff.; 15:51-56; 1 Thess. 4-5, all of which indicate that glorification occurs at the second advent of Christ. Furthermore, frequently in Scripture a future reality or possession is so certain and assured in the perspective of the author that it is appropriately spoken of in the present tense, i.e., as if it were already ours in experience. Thus Paul's

present tense "we have" points to the *fact* of having as well as the *permanency* of having, but *not* the *immediacy* of having. It is the language of hope.

It has been argued that perhaps Paul uses the present tense because the passing of time between physical death and the final resurrection is not sensed or consciously experienced by the saints in heaven; thus the reception of one's resurrection body *appears* to follow immediately upon death. But against this is the clear teaching of Scripture that the intermediate state is consciously experienced by those who have died (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-24; Rev. 6:9-11). It is clear both that the deceased believer is "with" Christ when he comes (1 Thess. 4:17), and that at death he/she has "departed" to be "with Christ" (Phil. 1:23). It would seem, then, that some kind of existence obtains between (hence, intermediate) a person's death and the general resurrection.

Beginning with v. 2 Paul mixes his metaphors. In v. 1 the resurrection body was likened to a house or a habitation, whereas in v. 2 it is likened to a garment. Paul mixes these two metaphors by saying that *we are clothed with the house* (v. 2b). But it is more than simply the putting on of a garment: it is the putting on of a garment over another. The picture is that of the heavenly body being put on like an outer vesture or topcoat, over the earthly body, with which the Apostle is, as it were, clad, so as not only to cover it but absorb and transfigure it. The assumption of the resurrection body, therefore, is not a creation ex nihilo, as if it were totally unrelated to the past, but is simply the fulfillment of a spiritual process which began with regeneration. We do not receive so much a new and different body as do we get the present one changed. Thus there is an element of both continuity and discontinuity (cf. Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:53: "this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality"; see also 2 Pt. 3).

The Judgment of the Believer
2 Corinthians 5:9-10

1. *The Objects of Judgment* - Only believers: (a) context concerned with Christians (4:16-5:10); (b) connection between the "we" who seek to please Christ of v. 9 and the "we" who are judged in v. 10; (c) unbelievers are not capable of "good" (v. 10); (d) saints are to judge the world (cf. 1 Cor. 6).

2. *The Nature of Judgment*

- **its purpose** - not penal, but retributive, not a declaration of doom, but an assessment of worth; eternal destiny not at issue; eternal reward is; an evaluation of faithfulness and service within God's family; this judgment does not determine entrance into the kingdom, but rather the status of those already admitted.
- **its inevitability** - "we must" appear
- **its universality** - literally, "the whole of us"
- **its individuality** - see Rom. 14:10-12
- **its mode of accomplishment** - "we must all *be made manifest*"; cf. 1 Cor. 4:5
- **its location** - the "bema" of Christ
- **its subject** (i.e., *who* is the judge?) - Christ (Jn. 5:22)
- **its measure/standard** - "recompensed for" (in proportion to) the things done in the course of bodily life
- **its content** (i.e., the nature of the rewards)
- **its time** - at the Second Coming (?) or contemporaneous with general judgment of the wicked at the Great White Throne in Rev. 20:11ff.

Discussion Questions

- (1) What is the "intermediate state" and what biblical texts would you cite to prove it?
- (2) How does the intermediate state differ from the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory?
- (3) If Christians are free from all condemnation, how is it that they will undergo judgment?
- (4) Talk about the practical and pastoral implications of this lesson when you are trying to counsel or console someone who has just suffered the loss of a friend or family member to physical death. Discuss the quote by Calvin at the beginning of this lesson. Do you agree with him?