

FUTUREWORLD pt.20 2-22-15

Intermediate State

(I Corinthians 15) Our friends, Dan and Beth Fox are in Florida for two months – down in Bradenton with the Pirates, getting ready for the 2015 season. Do you think? Do you think the Pirates will break through this year and get a playoff series win? Do you think the Penguins will discover the magic formula to win their second Stanley Cup in the Crosby-Malkin era?

Normally, looking ahead, predicting the future, is sort of fun to do, and that is what we have been doing in our morning studies over the last several months. We spent a number of weeks looking at the future of humanity and the planet as a whole and then we began the second half of our future studies which deal with the destiny of individuals. We have seen that each of us will spend eternity either in glory or in perdition and that all of us will enter our eternal dwelling through the entrance way of judgment day. But there are three other events or conditions that will precede judgment day for the vast majority of men. These are death, the intermediate state, and resurrection. By *resurrection* we mean the raising, transforming and glorifying of our physical bodies. This great event we have dealt with as we studied the rapture and as we studied the new earth so I will pass by it quickly today. What the Scriptures teach is that, at the time of Christ's return, the dead will be raised, the living will be given new bodies and, in these new bodies, we will spend forever. In I Corinthians 15 Paul writes at length about the coming resurrection. **41-44ab** *There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. 42 So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; 43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.* The point he makes here is that the body to come is going to be much more glorious than our present bodies. That is good to hear. We are going to be changed. **51-53** *Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will 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. 53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.* Now, that is all good news but when is it going to happen? When we become Christians? No. When we die? No. The repeated teaching of Scripture is that this resurrection, this physical transformation, will occur on the last day when Christ returns. That is the same day that brings with it judgment and the consequent

rewards and punishments. In II Timothy 4:8 Paul says he looks forward to the reward which God will award to him on that day. Question: has Paul received the reward he mentions here? No. He receives it on the day of Christ, not on the day of his death. Consistently, the Bible represents the reward of righteous men as coming at the end of time when the Master returns. So, you can see that, for most people, there is going to be a significant gap, a notable period of time between one's death and one's final condition. What are things like in the interim? Where are believers, where are unbelievers during the time between physical death and the resurrection unto judgment? That is our subject for this morning and so we entitle this teaching - the intermediate state.

Needless to say, there are all kinds of opinions out there about what happens to us after we die. We will look at some of those in our time together, but as is our norm we will concentrate on what the Bible has to say about our subject. And this time, I think it must be noted that the Scriptures don't have a whole lot to say about the intermediate state. This is probably the case because the intermediate state is just that - it is not the ultimate state of men. The Scriptures focus attention more on that which is enduring and permanent, on the return of Christ and the new era that He will begin. Therefore, we find it difficult to find any intellectually satisfying idea of the activities and conditions of the intermediate state. The Westminster Confession of Faith, which seeks to be an accurate compilation of Scriptural truth, says this about what happens after death and before Christ's coming: (WCOF 32:1) *"The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places for souls separated from their bodies the Scripture acknowledgeth none.* There it speaks of souls separated from their bodies continuing in a state of conscious existence. Souls separated from bodies - have you ever met one of those? Are we talking here about ghosts? Do you kids believe in ghosts? Does the Bible affirm the existence of ghosts? That depends what you mean. Yes, the Bible does affirm that the soul can maintain its existence apart from the body. Matthew 10:**28** *Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* Jesus asserts that men have the power to destroy the body but not the

soul. We speak of the *immortal* soul. It is the spiritual, invisible part of us, that part of us that continues beyond the grave. Everyone I know of who believes the Bible affirms the continued existence of the soul after death but there are different ideas about what this bodiless existence is like.

In the Old Testament we find the frequent use of the word and concept of Sheol. The term *Sheol* is not used uniformly. It can refer to hell but rarely does. It can refer to the grave, but usually doesn't, or it can refer generally to the realm of the dead, whether righteous or unrighteous. Similar to *Sheol* is the New Testament word *Hades*. Most of you would probably think Hades was a kinder, gentler word for hell, but it usually is not that. Like its counterpart *sheol*, *hades* may refer to a place of punishment but normally denotes the realm of the dead or the state of death in general. In Revelation 20:13 it speaks of Hades giving up the dead which were in it at the time of judgment, as though Hades were the holding area for spirits awaiting judgment. One passage in which *hades* is used as more than just the place of the dead is Luke 16 and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was a man of faith who, nevertheless, was impoverished in this life. The rich man, known traditionally as *Dives*, was a man of wealth who ignored the needs of others in his life. Both men died. Of Lazarus it says that he did not enter hades but was carried into Abraham's bosom. You may be familiar with the Negro spiritual, *Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham*. This is where that idea comes from, that, upon death, we enter into a blissful rest. But that isn't what happens to the rich man. The rich guy heads to what is called *Hades* where he finds himself in torment and agony. It does not seem to me precise to call this *hell*, but it isn't much better than that. Maybe you can compare it to the difference between going to jail prior to trial and going to prison after the trial. It is a temporary, bodiless condition of woe. Honestly now, I don't prefer to get my theology primarily from parables like this but we don't have much else to go on. There is one other passage of interest as it relates to the intermediate state of unbelievers. II Peter 2:9 (ESV) *the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment*. In this text Peter is expounding the severity of God's judgment against angels and the ancient world and here against wicked men. It says God is both keeping them for judgment while punishing them as they await it. This is perfectly consistent with what we read in Luke 16 about the condition of the unjust. There is hell to pay when Christ returns, but the suffering apparently begins in Hades during the intermediate state. And friends, please notice this. The time between your death

and judgment is nowhere spoken of as a time of probation or testing or continued opportunity. As death leaves you judgment will find you, and as judgment finds you eternity will fix you. The only time to repent is now, and you haven't a clue how long that now will last.

But most of you here are believers in Christ. You have repented and been saved from your sin. What is ahead for you? What is going to be the condition of believing, saved people between death and judgment? Before I give you the biblical answer to that I want to examine two other ideas on this that are provided by people and churches as the Christian answer. The first is the idea of soul-sleep, the other of purgatory. Soul-sleep is not what you get during a dull sermon. The doctrine of soul-sleep says that the soul of man when it is separated from his body at death essentially goes to sleep, it sort of enters a comatose condition until the day of resurrection. This is the teaching of the Seventh Day Adventists among others. The basis for this view is easy enough to understand. The New Testament, as well as the old, will sometimes speak of those who are dead as sleeping. One occasion of this is found in John 11 when a real man named Lazarus, not to be confused with the character in the parable, has died. Jesus says in John 11:**11-14** *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”* 12 *His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.”* 13 *Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.* 14 *So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.”* Do we deduce from this that death is just a sleep? I hardly think so. The language of sleep is meant to describe the deceased as he appears from the human viewpoint. It does speak accurately about the body which does lie dormant, unconscious and insensible until the resurrection. But, the soul of man does not sleep. On this the Scriptures are quite clear as we will see in a moment.

The second unbiblical teaching on the intermediate state arises out of Roman Catholicism and is known as *purgatory*. You are probably somewhat familiar with this idea. The term *purgatory* comes from the root *purge* and refers to the place in which believers are purged of their moral corruption prior to entering glory. Purgatory, understand, is not for unconverted people. It is an unpleasant stop on the way to heaven. According to Rome, anyone who dies at peace with the church, but who has not attained a state of Christian perfection will head to purgatory for a time and this includes the great majority of the saved. What the Roman church teaches is that the death of Jesus was good to remove from us the guilt of Adam's sin. Baptism is good to remove the guilt of all sins committed prior to the baptism, but purgatory is designed to cleanse you of all the sins

you commit after baptism that were not adequately covered by confession and penance. Purgatory can be short and light or long and hard depending on how you lived. It is different from hell in purpose and duration but not in type. Thomas Aquinas says, "*It is the same fire that torments reprobates in hell and the just in purgatory. The least pain in purgatory surpasses the greatest sufferings in this life. Nothing but the eternal duration makes the fire of hell more terrible than that of purgatory.*" In general, it is held by the Catholic church that the period of suffering in purgatory can be shortened by gifts of money, prayers by the priests, and masses, which gifts, prayers and masses can be provided for by the person before death or by relatives and friends after death. You may recall from your study of history that one of the things that so agitated Martin Luther was the selling of indulgences, which was based on the idea that gifts to the church could result in early release from purgatory for the designated loved one. That could be a very effective fund-raising strategy but nowadays the Roman church in the US doesn't say much about purgatory, although it is a doctrine still held officially by Rome. And what is the biblical basis for such a doctrine? Well, there is none. The Roman Catholics don't really pretend that there is. They do cite a reference from the apocryphal book of II Macabees but even that reference is so vague that no one could build a doctrine like this upon it. For the Christian who finds his theology in the Bible there is no place for purgatory.

Now, let's see what the Scriptures do say about the intermediate life for the Christian. We have already seen from the story of Lazarus in Luke 16 that good things are in store for us immediately upon our passing. We read that Lazarus was ushered into heaven by friendly angels. There are three other Scriptures that shed light on what things will be like for us in the intermediate state. The first is in Luke 23 where Jesus says to the repentant thief on the cross beside him that "today you shall be with me in Paradise." "Today," Jesus says, and it's rather hard to understand those words to mean anything but "today." But what was it the thief had asked Jesus to do? Luke 23:42 *He was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"* This guy had eyes to see that Jesus was truly a king. His ideas of his kingdom were probably very fuzzy, but He figured that somehow, even though they were both dying, that Jesus was going to someday have some kind of kingdom. So he requests that whenever this happens that Jesus show mercy to his dying neighbor. But Christ doesn't just make a promise for a day way out in the future. He says, *today you will be in paradise.* There is no place here for soul-sleep. There is no place for purgatory. That word *paradise* is used

elsewhere in the New Testament to mean *heaven*. The content or character of this paradise is not here spelled out but we are assured of one thing: if it is paradise, it is going to be good.

A second significant passage on the intermediate state is found in Philippians 1 where the apostle Paul says, *To be or not to be that is the question: whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die, to sleep; No more: and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the 1000 natural shocks that flesh is heir to. Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.* Those are, of course, the words of Hamlet, who considers death a possible escape from the pains of life. He contemplates suicide, but then determines not to do it since, as he admits, the world beyond may hold yet greater woe. “*Who would trials bear, to grunt and sweat under a weary life, but that the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country from whose boundaries no traveler returns, puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have, than fly to others we know not of. Thus conscience makes cowards of us all.*” Hamlet says, “To me, to live is heartache, but to die is too scary.” Paul says Philippians 1:**21** *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* Big difference! Paul says here with confidence “*to die is gain.*” One has to wonder how this can be if the best that awaits him is soul-sleep. He goes on **22-24** *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. 23 But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; 24 yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.* For the sake of others, Paul is interested in continuing this life but what he says about life beyond the grave is noteworthy. He says to depart is to be with Christ. Now that doesn’t tell us a great deal about the intermediate state but it does show that Paul expected to be in the presence of Jesus in heaven, and we know that is going to be good.

The third passage of note on the intermediate state is II Corinthians 5:**6-8** *Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight— 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.* Did you follow that? The apostle indicates that the most desirable state for a Christian is not found in this life but in being in the presence of Christ, at home with the Lord in a bodiless condition. Right? Right. In the body, absent from the Lord. Out of the body, present with the Lord. Now the Lord is present with us now, I grant you that, but as verse 7 indicates, we are attune to his presence by faith. When we die and go

to heaven we will see the Lord, and be in His presence in a way we are not presently. Put all these texts together and what we get is exactly what we read in the Westminster Confession earlier, that those who die in the Lord are “received into the highest heavens where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.” The intermediate state is not as grand and glorious as eternal glory. It is not complete. But we see three times over that we will be with Christ and that it is going to be good.

Let me make a couple of quick notes on the condition of those in heaven and then move to some application. We aren't given much light on what life will be like in heaven as we await our final redemption but a couple of things are at least implied in Scripture. One is that we will be aware of what is happening on earth. Revelation 6:**9-10** *When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; 10 and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”* Here the writer of the Revelation sees souls in heaven. These are those who had died as martyrs for Christ and they are concerned about what is happening on earth. **11** *And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also.* The saints in glory cared about the situation on earth. They spoke with God about it and he spoke with them. But even though the departed saints can speak with God and God can speak with them, there is one group that is not allowed to speak to the saints in light. Who is that? Those still living in the body. The Bible plainly affirms the continued existence of the dead but also plainly forbids the attempt to communicate with them. Deuteronomy 18:**10-12** (ESV) *There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer 11 or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, 12 for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.* The Bible condemns all attempts at communicating with the dead. And you, Christian, are to stay far away from all that kind of nonsense. You get involved with the occult and you open yourself up to the powerful influence of Satan.

So then, the applications of our study on the intermediate state do not include trying to communicate with deceased persons. That is a no-no. But, there are a couple of yes-yeses toward which I would like to direct you. The first is that we can take comfort and confidence from what God's word says about the intermediate state. We have seen that it is good. That, even though it is not the full glory of the eternal world, it is yet far better than the sin-plagued existence of this present life. We may look death squarely in the face and say with Paul: "To live is Christ, but to die is gain."

And then finally, I would direct you to do this, to concentrate your energies more on things spiritual than things physical. That you are a physical being I would not try to deny, but the word of God tells us that the essence of who you are is far more spiritual than it is physical. You would agree with that wouldn't you? I mean, on paper, almost everyone I know agrees that spiritual things are more important than physical things but few there are who live that way. We feed our bodies with great regularity but we neglect to feed our souls. We exercise our bodies to keep them in shape but we don't have time for spiritual exercises. When you get busy what things get bumped off your schedule? For most Christians it is prayer and Bible study and the nurture of family. Come on Christian, let's admit that our lives are imbalanced. Let's begin to order our lives by what we say we believe. Let's move some attention away from our temporal bodies to our immortal souls. II Corinthians 4:**16** *Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. Can you say that? One of the reasons aging is regarded so negatively in our culture can be seen right here. We don't care about the inner man. Pretty much our whole concern is the outer man that is destined to decay no matter how much money and time you throw at it. Have you ever owned an old car that keeps breaking down and you can't figure out whether to keep repairing it or get a new one? It is a painful question. We had an old Ford Taurus once that we kept throwing money into and it was a bad idea. I got rid of an 18 year old car this year. I could have paid to fix it but to invest more in a car that close to the grave would be a poor investment. Common sense says to invest in things that are going to last. II Corinthians 4:**17-18** *For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. As you set your priorities in life consider this. Consider that you have a soul that will live with Christ**

when your corpse is rotting in the ground. Don't just resolve to feed your body better; don't just resolve to exercise your legs more; remember what is eternal and invest your time and energies in the way of wisdom, for your joy and the kingdom's good.