

XLVIII. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective
What Does the Bible Say?

“What Happens When I Die? (Part 3) — The Intermediate State”

II Corinthians 5:8

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September 25, 2016 – Evening sermon

Let's start by looking at our key text for this study. II Corinthians 5:1–10 says [1] *For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home (this body) is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. [2] For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, [3] if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. [4] For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. [5] He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.*

[6] So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, [7] for we walk by faith, not by sight. [8] Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. [9] So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. The grass withers, the flower fades, and God's Word abides forever.

Here is our confession, The Apostle's Creed. Christian what do you believe? I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord; Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into Hell, the third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From there He shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Another confession we use is the Westminster Confession of Faith and I hope you know how faithfully this is worded to God's Word. One of the great unused instruments God has given to His people to grow in grace, even among Presbyterians is the proper study of the Westminster Confession of Faith and using the larger Catechisms which is a Q & A way of study. Also the use of study is the shorter Catechism which was designed for fathers to use in the context of their home to teach those basic truths. So I thought I would try to further draw you in to the Westminster Confession in our continued study of what happens when we die.

Here is an excerpt from chapter 32 of the Westminster Confession of Faith which is titled *Of the state of men after death and of the resurrection of the dead.*

Section I.—The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, (as a distillation from God's Word this says your body returns to dust) and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) (the body can be killed but not the soul), having an immortal subsistence (that is, it was made forever and can't be killed by any living being), 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 (a distillation of Hebrews 12:22–23 where souls in that immediate state are made perfect in the immediate presence of God in the heavenly Jerusalem); and the souls of the wicked are

cast into hell (not the final hell but the intermediate hell, just as believers are in an intermediate heaven), *where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day* (When believers are ushered into an everlasting heaven and unbelievers to an everlasting hell). *Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.*

That was the way the Westminster Divines let you know that there is no such thing as purgatory. That is an invention. It was a convenient invention whereby something called indulgences to get people out of that place could be sold to people and the church at that time with its corruption to make money. There are not multiple possibilities of where you go. If you are a believer when you die you go into the presence of the Lord immediately and your soul is perfected in righteousness awaiting the resurrection of the body. Those who do not know the Lord after they die are immediately cast into a torment but it is not a final torment. Their final torment awaits the coming of Christ, the judgment of that Day and the establishment of a place called Gehenna – the place of eternal punishment or the lake of fire. That is what the Confession is basically teaching.

Let's not stop there. I want you to see another excerpt from the Confession. What about those who haven't died when Jesus returns? *Section II.—At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up with the selfsame bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls forever.* The body that is raised will be different for the mortal body will put on immortality (I Corinthians 15:53–55). That body that is under the curse of sin that went into corruption and dust shall be given a body that is fit for eternity with no curse of sin and that shall be united to their souls forever.

The shorter Catechism deals with how to start teaching this. The shorter Catechism uses question 37. Q. 37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united in Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection. So by going over what the Westminster Confession and shorter Catechism says on this I have reviewed what we studied in our last study on the intermediate state from Hebrews 12:22–23 where the souls of believers are made perfect in righteousness, being with the Lord and are awaiting the resurrection of the body at the second coming of Christ.

We also learned from Revelation 6:9–11 that there are martyrs whose souls are before the Lord and who cry out to Him “How long will it be before our blood will be avenged?” The Lord's answer is giving them a white robe because it will be a little while and there are some more of you that are coming. But notice that they are in the presence of the Lord in a consciousness because while the body is mortal the soul is immortal. So there is no soul sleep. The body can be killed but not your soul and that's why the Bible says ‘not to fear those who can kill the body.’ The only One you should ever fear with awe and majesty is the One who can kill both body and soul and that is the Lord of Glory, the One who made the body and the soul. When a believer dies physically the soul doesn't die but goes to be with Him.

Why is there death? It is because of sin. There is no death in Genesis 1 and 2. Death comes in Genesis 3. The wages of sin is death. Physical death is separation of the soul from the body. Spiritual death is separation of humanity from God because of our sin nature. Eternal death is separation from God in the place of eternal punishment. The Bible teaches us in the book of Revelation that if you are born once you will die twice. You will have a physical death and an eternal death, but if you are born twice, born and born again, you only die once. The only

two exceptions from this are Enoch and Elijah. If Jesus doesn't come back before we die then everybody else has a 100 percent mortality rate. Hebrews 9:27 says that it is appointed unto man once to die and then the judgment.

What happens to the believer? Our bodies go to the grave and will be raised on the last day. What makes you, you? Adam became a living being, not when the dust was formed into a body but when the soul and spirit was given to him. Then Adam became a living soul destined for eternity and immortality. This leads us into what we will talk about in this study in further examination of the immediate state.

When we recite the Apostle's Creed in church I almost always get a letter asking me what it means when we say 'we believe in the catholic Church.' Please note it is spelled with a small c and not a capital C. Catholic with a small c is the word that comes from Latin meaning the church universal. It's the way a local church says that 'we're not the only show in town' or 'we're not the only show in the world.' God's church is all around the world and we stand united with every church that confesses these essential truths of Christianity.

If I don't get that letter I'll get one that say 'what does it mean that Jesus descended into hell?' Historically there are three ways to examine what that is attempting to say. In the original Apostle's Creed it wasn't there. Decades later it was added after the semicolon following 'He was dead and buried.' Orthodox Christians have interpreted 'Jesus descended into hell' in the Apostle's Creed one of three ways.

One way is that it is an editorial comment of what happened while He was on the cross. In other words, on the cross He descended into hell. I have mentioned this before but there is a phrase I don't say and that is 'hell on earth' because I believe it's only happened once. That is when all of the hell due for all of God's people for all their sins for all of eternity, was poured out upon Christ and He drank that cup to the bottom. So many see that as an editorial comment as to what Jesus took upon Himself while on the cross.

A second way is that it just refers to the grave, the place of the dead. So when Jesus died, He was buried and His body went to a tomb, while His soul went to the place of the dead.

The third way is also the second way but with something added to it. What did He do at the place of the dead? He did not undergo the hell of judgment. That was already done because when the hell of judgment came upon Him on the cross He then said "It is finished." When Christ says 'it is finished' there is no more to be done. It's done. So the disciples of the Apostle's Creed are attempting to make the point that Jesus' humiliation is at the cross and into the borrowed tomb, and then becomes His exaltation. His exaltation actually begins before His resurrection that in the place of the dead He is announcing His victory, particularly to a very specific group of people. So to get into this study we'll be looking at two passages of Scripture starting with Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:4–8 says [4] *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—*[5] *one Lord, one faith, one baptism,* [6] *one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* [7] *But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.* (Each one of us have a measure of God's grace, sufficient to save us but a measure so God is working in each of us differently yet for accomplishing the unity that is there.) [8] *Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."* This is talking about the elect of God. When Jesus died and rose again He purchased the elect of God as redeemed. So when He rose up, they in Him, rose up with Him. He led them captive into the heavens. From this ascended victory He gives gifts to men.

If you had lived during that time you would understand the picture here given in Ephesians. A king would go down in the valley to do battle. When he wins the battle and comes back his chariot would have tied to it the people whom he had conquered and brought to himself. So it is using that picture here as Jesus ascends back into heaven, those whom He has come to save ascend with Him in His victory. They are positionally set free for the glory of God. And when the kings came back from victory they also brought back some of the booty from the victory and they would throw it out to the people as gifts. So this picture is being used that would have been very common then, as Jesus the King has returned in victory setting us free from sin's penalty and power. He has brought us back to the heavens with Him so that we are joint heirs with Christ, seated in the heavenly places. Now this victorious King is giving gifts to each one of us. We all receive gifts according to the measure that He pours out.

Now let's look at this parenthetical explanation that is inspired by the Spirit through the Apostle Paul. Ephesians 4:9–10 says [9] *(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [10] He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)* So Jesus ascended, why? It is because He first descended to come and save us. Where does His descent take Him? It takes Him all the way to the grave and the place of the dead. Then He came up in victory, ascended into heaven where He will be when He ascends a second time when He comes again to bring His people to be with Himself. Let's look at one more passage that effected the addition of this statement 'He descended into hell' that is in I Peter 3.

I Peter 3:18–20 says [18] *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit* (His body is put to death but not His Spirit – when His body was in the grave where was His Spirit?), [19] *in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,* [20] *because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.* This is a very difficult text here. There are several interpretations of it.

One interpretation is that this is referring to the fact that the Jesus who died, His Spirit was sent to Noah so that when Noah preached Jesus was preaching to the people who would be under the judgment of God; the spirits now in prison from the days of Noah. Here is a second interpretation that I cast my lot with. Notice how it says 'the spirits in prison.' Many people immediately start thinking of people who have died and it's their spirit or their soul and I don't think that is what it is referring to. Every time I have been able to see, except for one in the New Testament, where that word 'spirits' is found, it is not referring to the spirits of humans but it's referring to angels, those spiritual beings.

So what is the text saying? I think the text is saying that when Jesus died on the cross they took him down and put His body in the tomb but unlike other bodies it would not see corruption because He would rise on the third day, but His Spirit went to the place of the dead. When He goes there He has a proclamation of victory that is aimed particularly at the angels who were imprisoned, who functioned in the days of Noah, leading people astray. And Jesus announces His victory that He has won on the cross, but the point is that His Spirit went to the place of the dead.

When they wrote the Apostle's Creed the original version said this; 'He descended into hades' which is the Greek word here for hell. When the Bible was translated into English the word hades would be translated hell. Therefore when the Apostle's Creed was translated for us into English instead of using the word hades they used the word hell. When I was pastoring in

Charlotte we actually used the original term hades when we recited the Apostle's Creed. He descended into hades, which is a general term for the place of the dead.

In the Old Testament, the word from Hebrew for hades is the word She'ol. The word She'ol is the place of the dead, secondarily a place of torment for the unbeliever but also a place of transition into the presence of God. It's a general term so when the Hebrew term gets translated in the Bible many will translate it to say 'hell', instead of transliterating the Hebrew word She'ol. Then in the Greek which replaces the Old Testament word She'ol, is the word hades, instead of transliterating it. So when the Apostle's Creed originally said 'He descended into hades' they simply translated it into hell itself.

Here is what I am trying to get you to understand. She'ol had two elements. One is the place in She'ol of the righteous who believed the promises of God and who are with the Lord. The Old Testament people understood this. Let's look at Psalms 16, a Psalm of David. Psalms 16:9–10 says [9] *Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.* [10] *For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.* Now we know ultimately that is fulfilled in Jesus (who suffered neither body nor soul corruption) and finally fulfilled in all who belong to Jesus, that we are not abandoned to the place of the grave. While our body will suffer corruption, our soul does not suffer corruption, but we will not be abandoned.

Again fulfilled in Christ but the implications for us is that our soul is not abandoned in She'ol. In other words, it is not abandoned because when we go to the place of the dead we are in the presence of the Lord. We are not abandoned by Him or separated from Him. We come before the face of God in glory and grace. Our body is suffering corruption but not our soul. Now I'd like to look at Psalms 73 which is a Psalm of Asaph, who is another man I'd like to meet when I get to heaven.

Psalm 73:23–26 says [23] *Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.* [24] *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.* [25] *Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.* [26] *My flesh (that is my body) and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* So the writer is telling us that this body is going to fail but my soul will be brought into His presence. When I go to the place of the dead I will not be abandoned but I will be in His presence. So believers in the Old Testament who have believed in the promises of God and trusted in the grace of God, revealed in the Old Testament pointing to Christ, died their body would go to corruption and their soul would go to the place of the dead but it would not be abandoned and separated from God in judgment for they would be in the presence of God.

This is not so for the unbeliever. The unbeliever would be under the judgment of God. That same picture of the Hebrew mind in the Old Testament of understanding what happens to someone when they die and that they go to the place of the dead, there is one part of the place of the dead that is in the heavens where you're in the presence of God. There is another place of the dead for the unbeliever in which they are separated from God and under the judgement of God. In other words, when you die you go into an immediate heaven for an intermediate period until the coming of Christ where you will go into the everlasting new heavens and new earth. The unbeliever when they die go immediately to a judgment place of She'ol but it is a temporary, intermediate place from which they will be brought before the judgment seat, then ushered into, thrown into, Gehenna, the lake of fire, which is everlasting judgment. We will cover the new heavens and new earth, and the place of the lake of fire in the next study.

So the word She'ol, in the Old Testament, with the immediate heaven and judgment (hell), changes but not the concept. Now we have a place of the dead called hades. There is a judgment torment area of hades and there is a blessing in the presence of God when you get to the New Testament. The name has changed but not the concept. Let's look at Luke 23 and in this passage we're at the cross. All of humanity is displayed at the cross in two thieves. One is mocking and the other who was once mocking is then converted. This thief that is converted confesses his sins, puts his trust in Christ and calls upon Christ to remember him.

Luke 23:39–43 says [39] *One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* [40] *But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"* [41] *And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."* [42] *And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* [43] *And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

The word 'paradise' is the New Testament term for the place of blessing in Hades. Paradise is not the final state. The final state is the new heavens and the new earth. Paradise is the initial state of the blessing of being in His presence when we die and our soul is there. Notice that there is no stop off place or purgatory. Today, when we die, my soul will be before the face of my Father. That dynamic of the place of the dead, hades, is called paradise. Now let's look at Luke 16 where we can see an insight into God's Word with the rich man and Lazarus.

Luke 16:19–31 says [19] *"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. [20] And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, [21] who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. [22] The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side (bosom). The rich man also died and was buried, [23] and in Hades (what part of Hades), being in torment (because he is an unbeliever, but the poor man is ushered into the presence of God immediately known as Abraham's bosom), he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. [24] And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'* [25] *But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. [26] And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'* [27] *And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— [28] for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'* [29] *But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'* [30] *And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'* [31] *He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"*

This passage is pregnant with all kinds of insights. Notice that there is an immediate passing, either into the place of blessing called paradise or Abraham's bosom in Hades or the Hades of torment, judgment. Secondly, it is fixed. There is no possibility of redemption at this point. There is a great chasm and death closes the door of grace. Thirdly, it is intermediate. We know this because from other texts when Jesus comes again those in the intermediate judgment of torment will be cast into the lake of fire, the everlasting torment. Those in the place of paradise or Abraham's bosom will be brought into a new heavens and a new earth.

It is said time and time again in the Bible and it is referred to here. Michael Rogers at the death of his grandmother said ‘you’d never accuse her of mysticism for when she was dying she called for the nurse to come into her room and as the nurse entered the room she was just sitting straight up in her bed with this gigantic smile on her face as the nurse said ‘what can I do for you?’ My grandmother said ‘nothing, don’t you see all these angels?’ The nurse said ‘no I don’t, let me give you a pill so you can go back to sleep.’ The nurse laid her back down and within the hour those angels had done their job.’ She came into the presence of the Lord. The angels carried the poor man to Abraham’s bosom, into paradise. They will meet you, sent from the Lord to bring you, if you know Christ as Lord and Savior, to the Lord or you will be ushered into intermediate torment, not final, but it begins immediately just like the blessing of His presence that is there for the believer.

So we have this declaration of the role of the angels at our death. We have this immediate passing into blessing or torment. This paradise or Abraham’s bosom, while a glorious place, it is not the final place and this place of torment is also not the final place. Have you ever wondered why the Bible says ‘and they will be thrown into hell’? It is because nobody really wants to go there, but also they will never repent and I will finish with that for even on the edge of hell our sin nature is so great we will not repent. That is also why the Bible says that they will weep and gnash their teeth. That is what they did to Stephen when he was being stoned. They gnashed their teeth and that is not a statement of remorse. It is a temper tantrum. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth against God and His glory. In fact, their repentance is unknown.

The rich man doesn’t say ‘O God forgive me’ and a message comes that you’re beyond forgiveness. He says ‘God, You’re at fault. Why didn’t You raise somebody from the dead?’ The rich man is asking for a miracle and that’s what most of us want. God says “I’ve already done one and He is called the Word of God. If you don’t believe the Word of God then they won’t believe the miracles. The Word of God is sufficient.” The depth of sin is so much that the same Lazarus that was so disrespected in life continues to be disrespected even from hell – make him my water boy – *send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.* (Luke 16:24b)

Pastor, why are you taking the time to show that? I say that because hopefully you have the sense as to why we say that Jesus went to the place of the dead. He met the thief on the cross their and announced His victory to the angels that rebelled in the days of Noah. Those are the things you are saying when you acknowledge His starting of His exaltation and His declarations of victory after He died with His body in the tomb for that is what His Spirit did, but more than that I want you to see that the angels will carry you to that immediate yet intermediate place of blessing. Those who don’t know the Lord will be taken to that immediate yet intermediate place of torment. Yet there is a final place when God joins you with a resurrected body with that soul and we’ll look further at that in the next study.

When you see the depth of the sin nature revealed in the rich man you need to know that you had that same sin nature one day. You didn’t want to listen to the Word. You wanted to use everybody and everything was all about you but God came in grace and broke your heart. He has now given you a new heart and a new record. You still have that old man that keeps wanting to go back to that sin nature but He has given you a new Spirit within you so that you can grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. You are a new creation awaiting your eternal existence, assured in Christ. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word working our way through these issues. We thank You so much for Your Word. Please, override the inadequacies of the preacher and teacher and cause Your people to rejoice in the truth of Your Word and through that Word rejoice in the God of the Word, our Redeemer and Savior, the God of glory, sent from the Father, Jesus and who sent the Holy Spirit to bring us to Him. I thank You in His Name, Amen.

Power Point

CHAPTER 32

OF THE STATE OF MEN AFTER DEATH, AND OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD

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. Besides these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

2. At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed: and all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

Q. 37 What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

A. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.