

CHAPTER 10

THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Reformed position

“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.” (WCF 32:1)

- The soul continues to live after the person dies.
- Elect souls are perfected in righteousness, go to heaven, behold God.
- Non-elect souls go to hell, are tormented.
- There is no other place, such as Purgatory.

Biblical terms for the intermediate state

לְאֵלֶּיךָ *šē’ōl*, “pit, grave, death, underworld” (66x)

Often parallel to מָוֶת *māwet* “death”

Place of departed dead in many cases, both of good and evil

May be related to the verb שָׁאַל *šā’al* “to ask”

ᾍδης *hades*, “Hades” (KJV “hell”) (11x)

NT word for place of departed dead

Righteous or wicked

Parallel to *šē’ōl*

παράδεισος *paradeisos*, “Paradise” (3x)

Luke 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7

Taken from Heb. פַּרְדֵּיזַּי *par^edēs* (3x in OT), from the Persian word for “garden”

Always good, place of righteous dead

Parallel to third heaven

2 Cor 12:2-4, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”

Tree of life there, Rev 2:7 (letter to Ephesus church)

“Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22)

NIV translates this phrase as “Abraham’s side”

Lazarus there, while rich man in “Hades”

οὐρανός *ouranos*, “heaven” (284x)

Often also used for “air, sky, space,” or as a Hebraistic metonymy for “God”

Usually the abode of God and the angels, often used in plural form

Sometimes used in church fathers as the place to which Christians go at death; cf. Rev 6:9; cf. 4:1-2

In the NT viewed as the source of blessings; e.g., Matt 5:12; 6:20; 2 Cor 5:1-2; Col 1:5; 1 Pet 1:4

γέεννα *geënnā*, “Gehenna, hell” (12x)

From Heb. הַבְּרֵית הַבְּנֵי הַחִינּוֹם *gē’ b^enê hinnōm*, “valley of (the sons of) Hinnom”; in Aram. גְּהִינּוֹם *gēhinnām* (cf. Jer 7:31-32)

Traditional site of hell and the last judgment; “Hell” in the NT, the final place of torment for the wicked

Used in Synoptics 11 times; once in James (3:6)

“Lake of fire” (6x)

Rev 19:20; 20:10, 14 (twice), 15; 21:8

Apparently the same as *geënnā*, since it also includes fire; cf. Matt 5:22; 18:9; but see Luke 16:24

ταρταρώ *tartarōō*, verb “hold in Tartarus” (2 Pet 2:4)

2 Pet 2:4, “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell [‘having *tartarized* them’], putting them into gloomy dungeons [‘chains of darkness,’ UBS {C}] to be held for judgment”

Tartarus in Greek mythology was considered the place lower than Hades, where divine punishment was meted out

Cf. Deut 32:22, “lowest *šēōl*” (תַּהֲטִיטַי לְאֵשׁ *šēōl tahtīt*) used in 2 Peter only for demons, not the departed wicked

Bliss of the saved in the intermediate state

Doctrinal statement

WCF 32:1, WLC 86, WSC 37

“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. . . .” (WCF 32:1)

Regarding the soul

Soul neither dies nor sleeps

Soul returns to God

Soul is made perfect in holiness

Soul received into highest heavens

Soul beholds the face of God, in light and glory

Soul waits for the resurrection of the body

Regarding the body

Body returns to dust, sees corruption

Body remains united to Christ

Q. What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death?

A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in 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 are again united to their souls and live and reign with him upon the earth a thousand years. Whereas the souls of the wicked 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, until the resurrection and judgment of ungodly men, after the millennial reign of Christ. (WLC 86, BPC version)

Related topic—the ethics of burial vs. cremation; good summary in David W. Jones, “To Bury or Burn? Toward an Ethic of Cremation,” JETS 53:2 (June 2010) 335-347.

Scriptural data

All the passages dealing with the subject show the state to be one of blessedness:

- Luke 16:22-25, Lazarus comforted

- Luke 23:43, thief in paradise (“today” modifies “you will be with me”)
- Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:8, Paul looks forward
- Heb 12:23, spirits made perfect

Mode of existence

The righteous dead in heaven are described as “souls” (ψυχή, *psuche*, Rev 6:9; but cf. 20:4) or “spirits” (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*, Heb 12:23). Pronouns and nouns are used of them, suggesting personality. E.g., Lazarus, Christ, and pronouns “I, you.”

While the NT emphasizes joy during the intermediate state, both the OT and the NT teach that the state is incomplete, and even undesirable (except temporarily).

Old Testament statements

Ps 6:5, “No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”

Ps 88:5, “I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care.”

Ps 115:17, “It is not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to silence.”

Ecc 3:19-21, “Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?” [Note that the KJV translates this last sentence as a declaration rather than as a question, as the NIV and ESV.]

Ecc 9:4-6, “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.”

Ecc 12:7, “And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

Isa 38:18-19 (thanksgiving of Hezekiah), “For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today.”

New Testament statements

Luke 16:22-28, Lazarus viewed as resting, yet not very active

Rev 6:9-11, souls of martyrs in heaven, clothed, yet waiting for fulfillment of God’s vengeance, told to wait a little more; question of body—cf. 7:13-17 and ch. 14

2 Cor 5:1-5, “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.² Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling,³ because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.⁵ Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

v. 2, “Clothed” 1 Cor 15:53-54

v. 4, Mortal “swallowed up” 1 Cor 15:54

v. 5, “Spirit as deposit” Eph 1:14;
cf. Rom 8:23, “first fruit of the Spirit”

For another view, cf. E. E. Ellis, *Paul and His Interpreters*, ch. 3 (Paul not referring to intermediate state in 2 Cor 5).

2 Cor 5:6-8, “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

Phil 1:21-23, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

Torment of the lost in the intermediate state

WCF 32:1, WLC 86

“ . . . 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.” (WCF 32:1)

- Cast into hell
- Torments
- Utter darkness
- Reserved to judgment

Scriptures used:

- Luke 16:23-24, the rich man in Hades was thirsty, tormented in flame
- 2 Pet 2:9, the wicked are being punished, reserved to judgment: “the Lord knows how . . . to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment.”
- Jude 7, inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah examples in suffering eternal fire

Doctrine of soul sleep

John Calvin’s first published work (*De Psychopannychia*, 1534) was a defense of the traditional Christian teaching that the souls of believers at death consciencely experience the blessings of God’s presence. And that the souls of the unsaved immediately experience God’s judgment. This was directed against the doctrine of soul sleep, that souls at death are unconscious until the resurrection. Some modern cults, as the Seventh Day Adventists, hold to soul sleep. Some postmodern evangelical writers (such as Stanley Grenz) maintain that there is no separate human “soul,” that the person ceases to exist at death, kept alive only in the memory of God. The previous sections of this chapter demonstrate that souls are conscience after death. These matters are also addressed in the Westminster standards:

WLC 86 (BPC version). What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death? A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in 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 are again united to their souls and live and reign with him upon the earth a thousand years. Whereas the souls of the wicked 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, until the resurrection and judgment of ungodly men, after the millennial reign of Christ.

WSC 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.”

The Shorter Catechism uses as proof texts Luke 16:23; 23:42; Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:23; and 1 Thess 4:14.

Matthew Henry in his *A Scripture Catechism in the Manner of the Assembly's* answers this doctrine with the following questions and answers:

- Do the souls of believers at death sleep with their bodies? No: for when we are absent from the body, we are present with the Lord, 2 Cor 5:8.
- Do they go to Christ? Yes: Having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, Phil 1:23.
- And will he receive them? Yes: Lord Jesus, receive my spirit, Acts 7:59.
- Shall they be where he is? Yes: That where I am there ye may be also, John 14:3.
- Will they be with him in heaven? Yes: We have a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens, 2 Cor 5:1.
- Do they pass into this glory at death? Yes: That when ye fail ye may be received into everlasting habitations, Luke 16:9.
- Do they immediately pass into it? Yes: This day shall thou be with me in paradise, Luke 23:43.
- Are they guarded by angels thither? Yes: he was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom, Luke 16:22.
- Are they happy then in their death? Yes: Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, Rev 14:13.

- Happier than in life? Yes: The day of their death is better than the day of their birth, Eccl 7: 1.
- And is their end peace? Yes: Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace, Ps 37:37.

(from the Bible Presbyterian-sponsored website, <http://shortercatechism.com>)

Christ in his intermediate state

Confessional statement

WCF 8:4, WLC 50, WSC 27

The Westminster standards clearly state (esp. WLC 50) that the clause in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell," should be interpreted to mean, "He continued in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day." The standards do not teach that he entered the place of the unrighteous dead.

Development in the Apostles' Creed

See John Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed* 340-80; also C. Hodge 2:616, and Shedd 2:604. Cf. BP Synod statement of 1971, Minutes 43-44. For detailed description of creed at various stages see Schaff *Creeds of Christendom* 2:45-55.

In the fourth century A.D. the creed said, "was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead."

In Rufinus's version of the creed (ca. A.D. 395), prepared for churches in Aquileia (in Italy, east of Venice on the Aegean Sea), this whole section was replaced by the words, "he descended into Hades."

Later editions of the creed had the conflate reading, containing both clauses.

The original creed, and the present creed properly interpreted, state that Christ was under the power of death only. We believe that his soul was in heaven—"Paradise," Luke 23:43.

Scriptures used to show a descent of Christ into hell

Those who believe that Jesus did enter hell normally use the following Scriptures as evidence.

- Ps 16:10, “you will not abandon me to the grave (*šē’ôl*)” (quoted in Acts 2:27; 13:34-35)

šē’ôl is used in Heb.; *hades* in Gk.

Parallelism shows “grave” to be the meaning of “see decay,” not the underworld or the place of departed spirits

Same conclusion applies in Acts context

“My soul” = “me”

- Matt 12:40, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Refers to the body, not the spirit (cf. Lazarus in the grave, John 11:34, 43)

- Rom 10:7, “‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).”

Paraphrase of Deut 30:11-14, showing the word of God to be accessible

“Deep” = “abyss” (*ἄβυσσος abussos*):

Used for “sea” in LXX, Gen 1:2; 7:11

Usually the abode of evil spirits

Here probably used for death itself, emphasizing that it is unreachable, combined with the idea of “sea” in Deut 30

- Eph 4:7-10, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.’ (What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions [KJV, ‘into the lower parts of the earth’]? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)”

Context is Christ's bestowing spiritual gifts to the church, vv. 7-8, 11

Paul quotes Ps 68:18: God leads away captives, God takes spoil, cf. eschatological theme in vv. 29-31

Paul applies to Christ, showing he has gifts (spoil) to distribute

Quote explained in vv. 9-10

In v. 9, Jesus descended to earth—"lower (parts) of the earth" is genitive of apposition; cf. Isa 44:23—uses same phrase, "lower parts of the earth" (Christ came "down" to earth, John 3:13; 6:38; etc.)

In v. 10, Jesus ascended to heaven with "captives and spoil"; idiom may be figurative, including promises, privileges, angels (1 Pet 3:22); or idiom may be more specific, including Satan and demons (phps. meaning of Col 2:15), or Christians (Heb 2:15)

- 1 Tim 3:16, "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."

Ancient hymn

"Seen by angels" appears to be after his resurrection

"Vindicated by the Spirit" = Jesus' resurrection; cf. Rom 4:25; 1 Pet 3:18

- 1 Pet 3:18-20, "Christ . . . was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built."

"Spirits now in prison" refers to Peter's own time

Christ preached to them through the Holy Spirit in Noah; cf. 2 Pet 2:5

Cf. Buswell's translation of this passage, based on a lecture given by A. T. Robertson (J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *Systematic Theology* 2:319):

" . . . Christ once for all died for sins, the Just One for the unjust ones, in order that He might bring us to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but was made alive by the Spirit; in which (Spirit) He went and preached, in the days of Noah, while the longsuffering of God was

waiting, while the ark was being built, to (the persons who are now) spirits in prison, to those who at (that) time were disobedient.”

Same interpretation in Gordon Clark’s commentary on 1 Peter; good comments in the Net Bible

- 1 Pet 4:6, “For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead [KJV does not have ‘now’], so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.”

In v. 5, Jesus will judge those who are living and those who have died

Many of those now dead (no article) had the gospel preached to them (when they were alive—aor. pas.); cf. 1:12

The *γάρ* *gar* makes Christ’s judgment in v. 5 more appropriate

Conclusion—These passages do not show any descent of Christ’s spirit into hell. Rather, Christ in his disembodied state was in glory in heaven—just as Christians are—awaiting his resurrection.