

The Intermediate State

Part One

By Anthony A. Hoekema

What is central in New Testament teaching about the future of man, as we have seen, is the return of Christ and the events which will accompany that return: the resurrection, the final judgment, and the creation of the new earth. But before we go on to consider these topics, we must give some attention to what is commonly called "the intermediate state" —that is, the state of the dead between death and the resurrection.

Since the time of Augustine¹ Christian theologians have taught that between death and resurrection the souls of men enjoy rest or suffer affliction while waiting either for the completion of their salvation or for the consummation of their damnation. In the Middle Ages this view continued to be taught,² and the doctrine of Purgatory was developed. The Reformers rejected the doctrine of Purgatory, but continued to hold to an intermediate state, though Calvin was more inclined to think of this state as one of conscious existence than was Luther.³ In his *Psychopannychia*, an answer to the Anabaptists of his day who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin taught that for believers the intermediate state is one of both blessedness and expectation—the blessedness is therefore provisional and incomplete.⁴ Since that time, the doctrine of the intermediate state has been taught by Reformed theologians,⁵ and is reflected in the Reformed Confessions.⁶

Recently, however, the doctrine of the intermediate state has been subjected to severe criticism. G.C. Berkouwer reproduces the views of some of these critics in his recent book on eschatology.⁷ G. Van der Leeuw 1890-1950), for example,

¹ *Enchiridion*, 109.

² Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Supp. 3, Q. 69, Art. 2.

³ P. Althaus, *Die Letzten Dinge*, 7th ed. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1957), pp. 146-49.

Cf. Francis Piener. *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953). III. 512. n. 21.

⁴ The text of this work can be found in Calvin's *Tracts and Treatises of the Reformed Faith*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), III, 413-90. See Berkouwer, *Return*, pp. 49-50.

⁵ E.g., Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), III, 713-30; W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, 591-640; Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., IV, 564-622 (3rd ed., pp. 645-711); L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, - 619-93; G. C. Berkouwer, *Return*, pp. 32-64.

⁶ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 57; Belgic Confession, Art. 37; Westminster Confession, Chap. 32 (or 34); Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 37; Westminster Larger Catechism, Qq. 86, 87.

⁷ *Return*, pp. 38-46.

maintains that after death there is only one eschatological perspective for believers: the resurrection of the body. He rejects the idea that there is "something" of man which persists after death upon which God builds a new creature.⁸ According to Scripture, so he insists, man dies totally, with body and soul; when man nevertheless receives new life in the resurrection, this is a wondrous deed of God, and not something which naturally flows out of man's present existence.⁹ To speak of "continuity" between our present life and the life of the resurrection is therefore misleading.¹⁰ God does not create our resurrection body out of something--for example, our spirit, or our personality--but he creates out of nothing, out of our annihilated and crushed life, a new life.¹¹

Another recent critic of the doctrine of the intermediate state is Paul Althaus, a Lutheran theologian (1888-1966): This doctrine, he maintains, is to be rejected since it presupposes the independent continued existence of a bodiless soul,¹² and is therefore tinged with Platonism.¹³ Althaus advances a number of objections to the doctrine of the intermediate state. This doctrine does not do justice to the seriousness of death, since the soul seems to pass through death unscathed.¹⁴ By holding that without the body man can be totally blessed and totally happy, this doctrine denies the significance of the body.¹⁵ The doctrine empties the resurrection of its meaning; the more one fills up the blessedness of the individual after death, the more one detracts from the significance of the last day.¹⁶ If, according to this doctrine, believers after death are already blessed and the wicked are already in hell, why is the day of judgment still necessary?¹⁷ The doctrine of the intermediate state is thoroughly individualistic; it involves a private kind of blessedness rather than fellowship with others, and ignores the redemption of the cosmos, the coming of the kingdom, and the perfection of the church.¹⁸ In short, Althaus concludes, this doctrine rips apart what belongs together: soul and body, the individual and the community, blessedness and final glory, the destiny of individuals and the destiny of the world.¹⁹

In reply to these objections it must be admitted that the Bible says very little about the intermediate state and that what it does say about it is incidental to its main eschatological message about the future of man, which concerns the resurrection of the body. We must agree with Berkouwer that what the New

⁸ *Onsterfelijkheid of Opstanding*, 2nd ed. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1936), pp. 35, 37

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Van der Leeuw's views are in many ways similar to the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists on this topic; see my *Four Major Cults*, pp.135-36, 293-95.

¹² *Die Letzten Dinge*, p. 155.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Testament tells us about the intermediate state is nothing more than a whisper.²⁰ We must also agree that the New Testament nowhere provides us with an anthropological description or theoretical exposition of the intermediate state.²¹ The fact remains, however, that there is enough biblical evidence to enable us to maintain that at death man is not annihilated and the believer is not separated from Christ. What this evidence is will be taken up later in the chapter.

At this point an observation should be made about terminology. It is commonly said by Christians that the "soul" of man continues to exist after the body has died. This kind of language is often criticized as betraying a Greek or Platonic way of thinking. Is this necessarily so?

It must be admitted that one certainly can speak of the "soul" in a Platonic manner. In the previous chapter this Platonic view of the soul was set forth, and the divergence between this view and the Christian conception of man was indicated.

But the fact that the Greeks used the term *soul* in an unscriptural way does not necessarily imply that every use of the word *soul* to indicate the continued existence of man after death is wrong. The New Testament itself occasionally uses the Greek word for soul, *psyche*, in this way. Arndt and Gingrich, in their *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, suggest that *psyche* in the New Testament may mean life, soul as the center of man's inner life, soul as the center of life that transcends the earth, that which possesses life, a living creature, soul as that which leaves the realm of earth at death and lives on in Hades.²²

There are at least three clear instances in the New Testament where the word *psyche* is used to designate that aspect of man which continues to exist after death. The first of these is found in Matthew 10:28, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul (*psyche*); rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell? What Jesus is saying here is this: there is something about you which those who kill you cannot touch. That something must be an aspect of man which continues to exist after the death of the body. Two more instances of this usage of the word are found in the book of Revelation: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls (*psychos*) of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" (6:9); "I saw the souls (*psychas*) of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God" (20:4). In neither of these two passages can the word *souls*

²⁰ *De Wederkomst van Christus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), I, 79, where Berkouwer says, "Who, when our earthly existence has ended, will wish to say more than the clear whispering of the New Testament?" (translation mine). The English translation of this sentence found on p. 63 of *The Return of Christ* does not accurately reproduce the Dutch word *fluistering* (whispering), rendering it by *proclamation*: "Who would pretend to be able to add anything to the proclamation of the New Testament?"

²¹ Berkouwer, *Return*, p. 51. Cf. H. Ridderbos, Paul, p. 507.

²² (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 901-902.

refer to people still living on the earth. The reference is obviously to slain martyrs; the word *souls* is used to describe that aspect of these martyrs which still exists after their bodies have been cruelly put to death.²³

We conclude, therefore, that it is not illegitimate or unscriptural to use the word *soul* to describe that aspect of man which continues to exist after death. It should be added that the New Testament sometimes uses the word *spirit* (*pneuma*) to describe this aspect of man: for example, in Luke 23:46, Acts 7:59, and Hebrews 12:23.²⁴

The Scriptures clearly teach that man is a unity, and that "body and soul" (Matt. 10:28) or "body and spirit" (I Cor. 7:34; Jas. 2:26) belong together.²⁵ Only in this kind of psychosomatic unity is man complete. But death brings about a temporary separation between body and soul. Since the New Testament does occasionally speak of the "souls" or the "spirits" of men as still existing during the time between death and resurrection, we may also do so, as long as we remember that this state of existence is provisional, temporary, and incomplete. Because man is not totally man apart from the body, the central eschatological hope of the Scriptures with regard to man is not the mere continued existence of the "soul" (as in Greek thought) but the resurrection of the body.

We go on now to inquire into what the Bible teaches about the state of man between death and resurrection. We begin by looking at the Old Testament. According to the Old Testament human existence does not end at death; after death man continues to exist in the realm of the dead, commonly called *Sheol*. George Eldon Ladd suggests that "Sheol is the Old Testament manner of asserting that death does not terminate human existence."²⁶ In the King James Version the Hebrew word *Sheol* is variously translated as *grave* (31 times), *hell* (31 times), or *pit* (3 times). In both the American Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version, however, *Sheol* has been left untranslated.

While granting that the word does not always mean the same thing, Louis Berkhof suggests a threefold meaning for *Sheol*; state of death, grave, or hell.²⁷ That *Sheol* may mean either the state of death or the grave is well established; but that it may mean hell is doubtful.

1) Generally *Sheol* means *realm of the dead*, to be understood figuratively as designating the state of death. *Sheol* is often used simply to indicate the act of

²³ On these passages see Hockema, *The Four Major Cults*, pp. 346-49

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 349-51

²⁵ On this point see Berkouwer's helpful chapter on "The Whole Man" in *Man: The Image of God*, pp. 194-233.

²⁶ *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 194.

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, pp. 685-86. On the teaching that *Sheol* may mean the place of punishment or hell, see also W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, 625-33.

dying: "I (Jacob) shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning" (Gen. 37:35); "if harm should befall him (Benjamin) you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (Gen. 42:38). In I Samuel 2:6, in fact, bringing down to Sheol is parallel to bringing someone into the state of death: "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up."

The various figures which are applied to Sheol can all be understood as referring to the realm of the dead: Sheol is said to have bars (Job 17:16), to be a dark and gloomy place (Job 17:13), and to be a monster with an insatiable appetite (Prov. 27:20; 30:15-16; Isa. 5:14; Hab. 2:5). When we think of Sheol in this way, we must remember that both the godly and the ungodly go down into Sheol at death, since both enter the realm of the dead.

(2) Sheol may sometimes be translated *grave*. A clear instance is Psalm 141:7, "As a rock which one cleaves and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol." This does not seem to be a common meaning of the word, however; particularly not because there is a Hebrew word for grave, *gebher*. Many passages in which Sheol could be translated by grave also yield good sense if one renders Sheol as *realm of the dead*.

Both Louis Berkhof and William Shedd suggest that sometimes Sheol may mean *hell* or the *place of punishment* for the ungodly.²⁸ But the passages which are adduced in support of this interpretation are not convincing. One text cited in this connection is Psalm 9:17, "The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God." But there is no indication in the text that punishment is involved. And one finds it difficult to believe that the Psalmist is here predicting the everlasting punishment of every single member of these wicked nations (*goyim*). The passage, however, makes excellent sense if one renders Sheol in the usual way, as referring to the realm of death. The Psalmist is then saying that ungodly nations, though they now boast of their power, shall be wiped out by death. Another passage adduced by Berkhof is Psalm 55:15, "Let death come upon them; let them go down to Sheol alive." In the light of the principle of parallelism which is generally characteristic of Hebrew poetry, it would seem that the second line is only repeating the thought of the first line: death (or desolation, the marginal reading) will come upon these my enemies. Going down to Sheol alive would then mean sudden death, but would not necessarily imply eternal punishment.

Still another text cited by Berkhof in this connection is Proverbs 15:24, "The wise man's path leads upward to life, that he may avoid Sheol beneath." But here again the obvious contrast is between life and death, the latter represented by the word *Sheol*.

It has not been definitely established, therefore, that Sheol can designate the place of eternal punishment. But there does begin to emerge already in the Old

²⁸ See L. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 685.

Testament the conviction that the lot of the wicked and the lot of the godly after death is not the same. This conviction expresses itself first in the belief that, though the wicked will remain under the power of Sheol, the godly will eventually be delivered from that power.

For example, in Psalm 49:14 we note that the wicked "are appointed as a flock for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd" (ASV). These words suggest the thought that death shall keep them and never let them go. The godly, however, shall be redeemed from the power of death: "But God will redeem my soul from the power (literally, from the hand of Sheol; for he will receive me" (v. 15). A sharp difference between the lot of the wicked and the lot of the godly after death is here revealed. The godly, it is said, will be redeemed from the power of death—a statement which at least suggests, without clearly affirming it, the promise of resurrection from the dead.²⁹

A passage with similar import is Psalm 16:10, "For thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol, neither wilt thou suffer thy holy one to see corruption" (ASV). The meaning would seem to be: You, Lord, will not abandon my soul (or me) to the realm of the dead permanently, and you will not permit me to see corruption. The Apostle Peter quotes this passage in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:27, 31), and applies it to the resurrection of Christ, affirming that by means of these words David was predicting that resurrection. The question is, What did this passage mean to David when he wrote it? It may have meant simply his confidence that, though he was in mortal danger at the time, God would not let him die. In Acts 2:30-31, however, Peter says about David, "Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades (the New Testament equivalent of Sheol), nor did his flesh see corruption." If the words of Psalm 16 could indeed be interpreted as a prediction of Christ's resurrection, they could also have meant for David the hope of his own resurrection. In view of Peter's use of the passage, we certainly cannot exclude the second interpretation.³⁰

The two passages just quoted indicate that the hope of deliverance from Sheol for God's people was already present in Old Testament times. We may further note some other Old Testament passages which indicate that the lot of the godly after death is better than the lot of the wicked. The simple statement about Enoch already suggests this thought, "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). The words of Balaam in Numbers 23:10 also imply that

²⁹ At this point we may see at least a hint of the thought that Sheol could designate a place of punishment for the wicked—in the sense that the ungodly shall remain in Sheol, whereas the godly shall be delivered from that realm.

³⁰ On this passage see N. Ridderbos, *De Psalmen* (Kampen: Kok, 1962), p. 176; D. Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), *ad loc.*; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1959), *ad loc.* On the concept of Sheol see Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (München: C. H. Beck, 1928), IV/2, 1016-29.

there is a difference between the lot of the godly and the lot of the wicked after death: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his."

A similar contrast is described in two other passages from the Psalms. Psalm 17:15 reads, "As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form." Though the primary reference of these words is probably to fellowship with God in this life, it is certainly not unwarranted to see in them a reference to life after death. In contrast with the lot of the wicked, to which he has referred in the preceding verses, the Psalmist hopes to behold the form or likeness (*temunah*) of God when he awakes from the sleep of death.³¹

Psalm 73:24 reads, "Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards thou wilt receive me to glory (or honor)." The word *kabhödh*, here rendered *glory* or *honor*, has no preposition before it, and can perhaps be thought of as an accusative of manner; it is variously translated "to glory," "into glory," "in glory," or "with glory." In the light of the entire Psalm, which contrasts the lot of the wicked with that of the godly, we may say that Asaph's faith here sees beyond the grave. Asaph is confident that, although the wicked now seem to prosper, they shall eventually perish (vv. 19, 27), but that he, though now suffering many chastenings (v. 14), will be received into glory after this life. That this is a permissible interpretation of the passage is evident from verse 26, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever."³²

What does the New Testament teach about the so-called intermediate state? We must affirm at the outset that, as was mentioned, the Bible does not say much about this state, leaving many questions un-answered. The teachings of the New Testament on this subject, however, do not contradict but rather complement and expand Old Testament teachings.

The New Testament, like the Old, teaches that man is not annihilated at death but continues to exist, either in Hades or in a place of blessedness sometimes called Paradise or Abraham's bosom. *Hades* is the usual Septuagint translation of *Sheol*. The meaning of Hades in the New Testament, however, is not exactly the same as that of Sheol in the Old Testament. Sheol in the Old Testament, as we saw, stood for the realm of the dead or, occasionally, the grave. During the Intertestamentary Period, however, the concept of Sheol underwent certain changes. In the rabbinical literature of this period, and in some apocalyptic writings, the view began to emerge that there is a spatial separation in the underworld between the godly and the ungodly; in some writings the word Hades began to be used exclusively for the place of punishment for ungodly souls in the

³¹ Cf. N. Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*: Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), *ad loc.*; Kidner, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*; Leupold, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*

³² Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*; D. Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), *ad loc.*; Leupold, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*

underworld.³³ The New Testament use of the word Hades to some extent reflects this development.

Most commonly, Hades in the New Testament designates the realm of the dead. It is so used in Acts 2:27 and 31, in Peter's Pentecost sermon: "For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption.... He [Christ] was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption." In this passage Hades is the Greek equivalent of Sheol in Psalm 16:10, and simply stands for the realm of the dead. Peter sees these words fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ: Christ was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, neither did his flesh see corruption.

Hades is used several times in the book of Revelation; here it also means the realm of the dead. In 1:18 Hades is pictured as a prison with doors: "I [Christ] have the keys of Death and Hades." In 6:8 Hades is again described as in close conjunction with death: "And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him." In 20:13 Hades is pictured as a realm which gives up its dead: "And the sea gave up the dead in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done." This last passage leads Joachim Jeremias, in his article on Hades in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, to say that Hades in the New Testament must refer to the intermediate state, since it is said to give up its dead at the time of the resurrection.

Hades also means the realm of the dead in Matthew 11:23, "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades." These words are an echo of Isaiah 14:13 and 15, where the prophetic word comes to the king of Babylon, "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven.. But you are brought down to Sheol.'" The preceding verses vividly describe the entrance of the king into the realm of the dead. Similarly Jesus here says to Capernaum that, though in its pride it now exalts itself to heaven, it shall descend to the realm of the dead (the place of humiliation and abandonment) because it refused to repent at the words of Jesus. That this descent into Hades implies further judgment is clear from verse 24, "But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

Another passage where Hades designates the realm of the dead is Matthew 16:18, Jesus' words to Peter after the latter had made his great confession: "And upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (ASV). The expression "the gates of Hades" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew phrase "the gates of Sheol." The last-named expression is found in Isaiah 38:10, where Hezekiah, expecting to die soon, is reported as saying, "I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years." A similar phrase, "the gates of death," is found in Job 38:17 and Psalm 107:18. These expressions picture the realm of the dead as a heavily fortified prison with strong gates, within

³³ J. Jeremias, "*hades*," TDNT, I, 147. Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, IV/2, 1016-22.

which the dead are confined. In Matthew 16:18 Christ promises that his church will never be overwhelmed or conquered by death, since he himself is the conqueror of death. Death can never wipe out Christ's church. Even though the members of the church must die one by one, the church will continue to exist throughout eternity.

There is one New Testament passage, however, where the word Hades is used, not just as a designation of the realm of the dead, but as a description of the place of torment in the intermediate state: the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. It is not said that Lazarus entered Hades when he died, but rather that he was "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (v. 22). Of the rich man after death, however, it is said that "in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes...." Here Hades stands for the place of torment and suffering after death, whereas "Abraham's bosom" is a place or condition of happy existence (see also v. 25). As was pointed out above, this shift in the meaning of Hades parallels a similar shift in certain Jewish writings of that time.

One could object that this is a parable, and that one does not go to parables to obtain direct doctrinal teaching about conditions after death. Though this is true, the parable would be utterly pointless if there is not in actual fact a difference between the lot of the godly and that of the ungodly after death. The point of the parable turns on the future misery of the rich man and the future comfort of Lazarus.

In this parable, then, Hades is the place or condition of suffering and punishment for the ungodly. It should further be noted that the parable does not picture conditions as they will be after the resurrection. In verses 27-28 the rich man refers to his five brothers who are still living on the earth —this situation would be impossible if the resurrection had already occurred (cf. also v. 31). We conclude, then, that both the sufferings associated with Hades and the comforts associated with Abraham's bosom, as described in this parable, occur in the intermediate state.³⁴

Summing up, what can we learn about the intermediate state from the biblical use of the concepts Sheol and Hades? We may note the following points: (1) Persons do not go totally out of existence after death but go to a "realm of the dead." (2) In this realm of the dead the ungodly shall remain, with death as their shepherd. The New Testament adds the detail that after death the ungodly will suffer torment, already before the resurrection of the body (Luke 16:19-31). (3) God's people, however, knowing that Christ was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, have the firm hope that they too shall be delivered from the power of Sheol. The New Testament again carries this hope one step further when it suggests that after death the godly are comforted (Luke 16:25). In each case we note that the New Testament complements and expands on Old Testament

³⁴ The New Testament word for the place of punishment in the final state is Gehenna, about which more will be said later (see below, p. 267).

teachings.

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