

The Intermediate State

Part 2

By Anthony A. Hoekema

What the New Testament says about Hades, however, by no means exhausts its teaching on the intermediate state. We turn now to some specific passages which shed further light on this question.

The New Testament says little about the condition of the ungodly between death and the resurrection, since its chief concern is with the future of God's people. As we saw, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus depicts the rich man as suffering torment in Hades after death. Perhaps the clearest New Testament passage dealing with the state of the ungodly dead during the intermediate state is II Peter 2:9, "The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment" (NIV). Peter has been expounding the severity of divine judgment over the angels that sinned, over the ancient world, and over Sodom and Gomorrah. According to verse 4 God cast the angels that sinned into hell (Greek, *Tartarys*), to be kept until the judgment. In verse 9 Peter is speaking about unrighteous men. These, he says, God knows how to keep or hold under punishment until the Day of Judgment-literally, while being punished. The Greek word used here, *kolazomenous*, is a present passive participle from the verb *kolazo*, to punish. The present tense of the participle conveys the thought that this punishment is a continuing one (note the NIV translation, quoted above). The words *eis hēmeran krises*, until or for the Day of Judgment, tell us that what is described here is not the final punishment of the ungodly, but a punishment which precedes the judgment day.¹ It cannot be maintained, further, that the punishment here spoken of is administered only during this present life, since the words "until the day of judgment" clearly extend the punishment until that day. This passage, therefore, confirms what we have learned from the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and tells us that the ungodly undergo continuing punishment (the nature of which is here not further described) between their death and the Day of Judgment.

We now go on to ask, What does the New Testament teach about the condition of the believing dead (or, to use a biblical expression, "the dead in Christ") between death and the resurrection? Three important passages come up for consideration here.

¹ Calvin, in his commentary *ad loc.*, says that though the participle *kolazomenous* is in the present tense, it should be understood as referring to a future punishment to be administered at the last judgment. But if this was Peter's meaning, why did he use the present tense?

The first of these contains Jesus' words to the penitent thief. To understand their thrust, we must look at the thief's prayer as well as at Jesus' promise: "And he [the penitent thief] said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into (mg., in) your kingdom.' And he [Jesus] said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:42-43). Earlier, this thief had rebuked his fellow malefactor and had expressed penitence for his wrongdoings. Now he turned to Jesus in faith and anticipation. As someone presumably reared in the Jewish faith, the thief believed in a Messiah who would some day, perhaps at the end of the world, establish a glorious kingdom. Being now convinced that Jesus was that Messiah, he turned to him and asked, "Remember me when you come into (or in, as some manuscripts read) your kingdom." The thief did not expect to be so remembered until some time in the far distant future. But Jesus' reply promised him even more than he had asked for: "Today you will be with me in Paradise."²

The word paradise is used only here and in two other New Testament passages, II Corinthians 12:4 and Revelation 2:7. In the II Corinthians passage Paul tells us that he was caught up into Paradise in a vision; the expression Paradise is parallel to third heaven in verse 2. Here, therefore, Paradise means heaven, the realm of the blessed dead, and the special habitation of God,³ In Revelation 2:7 we read about the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God- here again Paradise refers to heaven, though to the final state rather than to the intermediate state. We conclude that Jesus promised the penitent thief that the latter would be with Christ in heavenly bliss that very day. This promise, needless to say, did not exclude Jesus remembering the thief at the time of his Second Coming, when he would indeed come finally into his kingdom, but it affirmed that already on that day, immediately after his death, the penitent thief would share heavenly joy with Christ.⁴

These words of Jesus give us a brief but memorable glimpse into the state of God's people after death. Surely soul-sleep is here excluded, for what would be the point of saying these words if the thief after death would be totally unaware of being with Christ in Paradise?⁵

² To make the word *today* go with the words "he said to him," as, e.g., Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses do in order to make the verse fit their teachings, is unwarranted. For when else could Jesus say these words but today? The reason why Jesus added the word *today* is evident from the preceding request (see Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, p. 353).

³ See Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 432-37.

⁴ On this passage see also the commentaries on Luke by N. Geldenhuys (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) and L. Morris (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974). On the meaning of *Paradise*, see Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., II, 264-69; IV/2, 1118-65.

⁵ The position of Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses is also excluded by this passage. Their position is not that of "soul-sleep" but rather that of "soul-extinction," - since they hold that after death nothing of man survives, and that man then becomes totally nonexistent. See Hockema, *The Four Major Cults*, pp. 110-11, 135-36, 265-66, 293-94, 345-59.

A second significant passage on the intermediate state is found in Philippians 1:21-23, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life 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."

In verse 20 Paul had expressed his confidence that Christ would be magnified in his body whether by life or by death. In verse 21 he makes the bold assertion that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain. Why does Paul here call death gain? One could argue that he is thinking only of the day of resurrection and saying nothing about the intermediate state.

Verse 23, however, sheds further light on the matter. There he says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." *Analysai* (to depart) is an aorist infinitive, depicting the momentary experience of death. Linked to *analysai* by a single article is the present infinitive, *einai* (to be). The single article ties the two infinitives together, so that the actions depicted by these infinitives are to be considered two aspects of the same thing, like two sides of the same coin.⁶ What Paul is saying here is that the moment he departs or dies, that very same moment he will be with Christ.

Paul does not tell us here exactly how he will be with Christ. If he were referring only to the resurrection at the last day, he could have made this plain—see his unambiguous allusion to the resurrection of the body in 3:20-21. Here, however, he is simply thinking of the moment of his death. The moment I die, Paul says, I will be with Christ. This condition, he adds, will be "far better" than the present, clearly rejecting the thought that after death he will enter into a state of soul-sleep or nonexistence. For how could soul-sleep or nonexistence be "far better" than the present state, in which he does have conscious, though imperfect, fellowship with Christ?⁷

Again we have light on the intermediate state—not a great deal of light, but enough to give us comfort. One could say, in fact, that there is a striking parallel between what Paul says here and what Jesus said to the penitent thief: "With Christ—this is all Paul knows about the intermediate state. It does not surpass what Jesus said to the dying thief (Luke 23:43)."⁸

We turn now to the third significant New Testament passage on the intermediate state, II Corinthians 5:6-8. Fully to understand these verses, however, we must begin at the beginning of the chapter. Verse 1 reads, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not

⁶ See A. T. Robertson, *Grammar of the Greek Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 787. Cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. R. W. Funk (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), sec. 276 (3).

⁷ On this passage of. H. Ridderbos, Paul, pp. 498-99; G. C. Berkouwer, *Return*, pp. 53-54.

⁸ G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 553.

made with hands, eternal in the heavens." It would seem clear that by "the earthly tent" which is to be destroyed Paul means the present mode of existence on earth, full of tribulation and suffering (see chap. 4:7-17), a mode so temporary that it can be compared to living in a tent. The chief problem of interpretation here is to determine what is meant by "the building from God, the house not made with hands." There have been, in the main, three views: (1) The building from God means a kind of intermediate body between the present body and the body of the resurrection; at death believers receive this intermediate body, but at the Parousia this intermediate body will be replaced and surpassed by the resurrection body⁹ (2) The building from God is the resurrection body which we shall receive at the Parousia¹⁰ (3) The building from God describes the glorious existence of the believer in heaven with Christ during the intermediate state.¹¹

We need not spend much time with the first view, since the "build-ing from God" is said to be eternal, whereas the intermediate body envisioned in this interpretation would be only temporary. Besides, there is no set Prul den she Bible to such an "intermediate body." The only contrast Paul deals with in I Corinthians 15 is that between the present body and the resurrection body.

This leaves us with a choice between (2) the resurrection body and (3) the glorious existence of believers after death in the intermediate state. It is indeed very difficult to make a choice between these two. There are elements in this verse and in this chapter which do indeed suggest the thought of the resurrection body: for example, the idea of being clothed upon with or putting on our heavenly dwelling (v. 2), and the statement that when we are further clothed, what is mortal will be swallowed up by life—a statement which reminds us of the imagery of I Corinthians 15:53, "This perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality." On the other hand, there are elements in the chapter which seem to point to the intermediate state: for example, the house not made with hands is said to be in the heavens. Surely we are not to think, are we, of our resurrection bodies being stored away for us somewhere in heaven? Another difficulty with the second interpretation is the present tense of "we have" (*echomen*) in verse 1. If Paul had been thinking of the resurrection body, why did he not say, "we shall have"?

⁹ Among those who defend this view are R. H. Charles, *Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, Judaism, and Christianity* (New York: Schocken, 1963; orig. pub. 1913), pp. 458-61; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1967; orig- pub. 1955), pp. 309-19; Henry M. Shires, *The Eschatology of Paul*, p. 90; D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of Sr. Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 269.

¹⁰ James Denney, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Armstrong, 1903), *ad loc.*; Floyd V. Filson, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1952), Vol. X, *ad loc.*; Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, *ad loc.*; H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, pp. 499-501.

¹¹ Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., IV, 596 (3rd ed., pp. 681-82); John Calvin, *II Corinthians*, *ad loc.*; Charles Hodge, *II Corinthians*, *ad loc.*; R. C. H. Lenski, *II Corinthians*, *ad loc.*; R. V. G. Tasker, *II Corinthians* (Tyndale Bible Commentary), *ad loc.*; G. C. Berkouwer, *Return*, pp. 55-59.

Though one can argue plausibly for either interpretation (2) or (3), neither view is completely satisfactory. Very impressive, therefore, is Calvin's treatment of the verse in question. After having stated some of the difficulties of the passage, Calvin says, in his commentary on II Corinthians, "... I prefer to understand it [v. 1] as meaning, that the blessed condition of the soul after death is the commencement of this building, and the glory of the final resurrection is the consummation of it."¹² Calvin's interpretation, in other words, combines (2) and (3) above. "Intermediate state" and "resurrection body" are here understood not as an either-of but as a both-and. This view of the passage, it seems to me, does most justice to Paul's words, and helps us to understand the future of the believer as a unitary experience, though divided by the resurrection into two phases. Both of these phases, however, involve an experience of heavenly glory.

Verse 1, then, tells us what happens immediately after death: When the earthly tent in which we now live is destroyed or dissolved (the aorist tense of *katalytē* suggests the moment when death occurs), we have, not at some future time but immediately, a building from God. That is, as soon as we who are in Christ die, we enter into a glorious heavenly existence which is not temporary like our present existence but permanent and eternal.

Though the first phase of this existence will be incomplete, awaiting the resurrection of the body at the Parousia, this entire mode of being, from the moment of death to the resurrection and then throughout eternity, will be glorious, far to be preferred to our present existence.

In the following verses Paul further develops what he has said in verse 1. In verse 2 he makes the point that, since this earthly life is full of afflictions, we who are believers long to put on or to be clothed upon with our heavenly dwelling-note that Paul here combines the figures of dwelling-place and clothing. Verse 3, "since when we are clothed, we will not be found naked" (NIV), makes us wonder what Paul means here by nakedness. Many commentators, particularly those who understand the "building from God" as the resurrection body, interpret the nakedness of verse 3 to mean the disembodied existence which precedes the resurrection.¹³ Paul's words are then understood to mean that he shrinks from the thought of being in such a disembodied state. But such shrinking would be inconsistent with what he says in Philippians 1:23, and also with what he says in verse 8 of this chapter. When, however we understand the "building from God" to mean the heavenly mode of existence which begins immediately after death and culminates in the resurrection body, we may interpret the nakedness spoken of here as meaning the lack of the full glory of this heavenly type of existence. In this sense even our present earthly life is characterized by nakedness, in distinction from our being clothed upon with heavenly glory. In verse 4 Paul indicates that we sigh with anxiety while we are still in our earthly tent, not because we want to be unclothed but because we wish to be clothed upon with

¹² Trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), *ad loc.*

¹³ E.g., Hughes, Filson, Denney, and Plummer.

our heavenly dwelling. We long for this future heavenly existence, so that the mortality of our present mode of being may be swallowed up by the unending, glorious life that awaits us.

This brings us to verses 6-8: "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) We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." Why does Paul say that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord? Because in the present life "we walk by faith, not by sight"; that is, our present fellowship with the Lord, good though it is, still leaves much to be desired. Therefore Paul goes on to say, "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." At this point he is not speaking of the resurrection but of what happens immediately after death. This is evident, first, from the words "away from the body" (*ek tou somatos*); if he had intended to speak about our existence in the resurrection body, he should have said, "away from *this* body."¹⁴ This is evident, further, from the tenses of the verbs used. We find two aorist tenses in verse 8: *ekdēmēsai* (to be away from home) and *endemesai* (to be at home). The aorist tense in Greek suggests momentary, snapshot action. Whereas the present tenses of the same verbs in verse 6 picture a continuing at-homeness in the body and a continuing away-from-home-ness as to the Lord, the aorist infinitives of verse 8 point to a once-for-all, momentary happening. What can this be? There is only one answer: death, which is an immediate transition from being at home in the body to being away from the body. At the very moment when this happens, Paul is saying, I shall begin to be at home with the Lord. The word *pros* (in the phrase *pros ton kyrion*, "with the Lord") suggests a very close fellowship with the Lord, implying that the communion with Christ which will be experienced after death will be richer than that which was experienced here on earth. At the moment of death, in other words, Paul hopes to be at home with the Lord.

Paul does not tell us exactly how we shall experience this closeness with Christ after death. We have no description of the nature of this fellowship; we can form no image of it. Since we shall be no longer in the body, we shall be delivered from the sufferings, imperfections, and sins which haunt this present life. But our glorification will not be complete until the resurrection of the body will have taken place. Therefore the condition of believers during the intermediate state, as Calvin taught, is a condition of incompleteness, of anticipation, of provisional blessedness.

The Bible does not have an independent doctrine of the intermediate state. Its teaching on this state is never to be separated from its teaching on the resurrection of the body and the renewal of the earth. Therefore, as Berkouwer points out, the believer should have, not a "twofold expectation" of the future, but

¹⁴ Cf. G. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, p. 194: "He [Paul] would scarcely have expressed himself precisely thus, had he meant that immediately another body would be substituted, for that state in such a new body would hardly be describable as the state of one absent from the body."

a "single expectation."¹⁵ We look forward to an eternal, glorious existence with Christ after death, an existence which will culminate in the resurrection. Intermediate state and resurrection are therefore to be thought of as two aspects of a unitary expectation.¹⁶

At the same time, biblical teaching on the intermediate state is of great significance. Believers who have died are "the dead in Christ" (Thess. 4:16); whether they live or die, they are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8). Neither life nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39).

This teaching should bring us great comfort. In terms of the imagery of II Corinthians 5:6-8, our present life is actually a being away from the Lord, a kind of pilgrimage. Death for the Christian, however, is a homecoming. It is the end of his pilgrimage; it is his return to his true home.

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¹⁵ *Return*, chapter 2, "Twofold Expectation?", pp. 32-64.

¹⁶ The interpretation of the "building from God" (II Cor. 5:1) given above, as referring both to the intermediate state and to the resurrection body, supports the idea of a unitary eschatological expectation. On this passage, as well as on other passages discussed in this chapter, see also Karel Hanhart, *The Intermediate State in the New Testament* (Francker: Wever, 1966).