

**Eternity in Biblical Perspective:
Heaven & Hell –
The Final State—If I Should Die Before I Wake...What's Next?**

Hebrews 9:27-28

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We are in a series on eternity in Biblical perspective with a specific desire to look at what the Bible says about the matters of heaven and hell. We are going to walk our way through this. Hebrews 9 is the foundational text for three of our sermons. We started with it in the last study and we'll use it in this study and the next one. It's not because there is anything in it pertaining to what I'm going to preach about directly. One might think "What does that mean?" I hope to explain that to you in this study. Let's look at Hebrews 9:25-28;

25 Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, 26 for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he (Jesus Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (I believe that when Jesus came that inaugurated the end of the ages. It just remains to be seen when the end is consummated.) 27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

This is what I want you to see. The text gives us some information on the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, the High Priest who brings Himself as the Lamb to give the sacrifice that ends all sacrifices so that by His death we might live. Therefore through that finished work He has now inaugurated the end of the ages that will be consummated when that One who gave Himself comes again. In between there's a little piece of information that is given to you in terms of men. We have an appointment we won't cancel. You are appointed once to die and another appointment we can't cancel is the judgment.

In the last study we took a look at the matter of death and I want to quickly review that and then in the next study we'll look at the matter of judgment. *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*, in the context, when Jesus comes back there is the judgment. Here's the problem. What

happens if you die before He comes back and there's the judgment? It is that answer we'll give in this study. In between death and the judgment, what about this intermediate stage? After the last study I had several ask me "I understand death and heaven and hell but what happens when you die and Jesus hasn't come back yet?" Of course, there are multiple, fanciful ideas. In the Roman Catholic religion they have five possibilities for you, all the way from limbo to purgatory to various kinds of purgatories. Then there are some who say from the Old Testament that when Jesus did away with paradise and Abraham's bosom but what does the Bible say about this? Cults talk about the matter of soul sleep and then there are the far out ideas of re-incarnation possibilities.

There are all these fanciful, exotic ideas out there on this but we need to know what the Bible tells us on this. We won't fall short of that and we won't go beyond that with speculation. Remember what I said about death, the resurrection and the judgment. The Bible doesn't tell us everything there is to know but it tells us all that it wants us to know. So what has He told us about the intermediate state that He wants us to know?

We aren't the first ones to ask where you go after you die and Jesus hasn't come back yet. There were some people at a church called Thessalonians and that is probably the first place where local, state persecution was actually killing Christians. Paul had been there. Paul said, "If you're saved you're going to heaven and Jesus is coming back again. Then there will be a judgment and at the judgment His sheep will be gathered in and the goats will be set aside." Paul obviously taught them about the second coming and the judgment but then all of a sudden you have people who are dying who are Christians and Jesus hadn't come back yet. So these people actually wrote Paul a letter and they asked him, "What happened to the believers who just died and Jesus hasn't come back yet?" Paul decides to answer them inspired by the Holy Spirit and that's in I Thessalonians 4. We have this marvelous insight from Paul on this. We will be looking at a number of passages in this study so that we can walk ourselves faithfully through this issue.

Here is Paul's answer about those who have died prior to Christ's coming and the judgment. I Thessalonians 4:13-18 says

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed (This is the word we get agnostic from or ignorant.), brothers, about those who are asleep (Paul uses the word asleep for believers who have died, why would he use this word?), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep

(Now we see for sure that sleep isn't referring to their present status but it's referring to their death process. He refuses to use the word *thanatos* which means radical separation. He decides to use a euphemism because Jesus has

taken the sting out of death and so he uses the phrase 'fallen asleep' but it obviously doesn't mean an inert, unconscious state because they are with Jesus. How do I know they are with Jesus? It is because when Jesus comes back they are coming back with Him when He comes so clearly sleep wasn't referring to their status but sleep was referring to the victory over death.)

15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Here we see a couple of things. We see that when Jesus comes back He will come back with those who have already died. Their bodies will be raised and there is a resurrection of the bodies that happened at that time. Then those who are alive when Jesus comes shall be caught up together to be with them with the Lord, then comes the judgment and then the new heavens and the new earth and that's a future study for us. That's what will take place in this movement. So what about those who have fallen asleep in Christ that are with the Lord and what about the unbelievers intermediate state who have died and the Lord has not come back? What would the Bible tell us about that?

Let's take a moment to remember some in the last study. What did we say about death and where did it come from? I told you about this thing called the birth of death in the last study. The birth of death is that God birthed death as divine judgment upon the original sin of Adam. When Adam sin God's promise in that day he would die was fulfilled and then all of us who were born of Adam, with Adam's sin nature and death spreads to all men for the wages of sin is death. So death is birthed by the divine judgment of God upon the original sin of Adam and then it spreads to all of the sons and daughters of Adam as we also sin with the sin nature that we inherit from him.

Secondly, what about the death of death? Not only was death born but death has been defeated, killed. The death Jesus died defeated death for us. So death is put to death by the victory of Christ over the grave and the sting of death has been removed. Christ has won the victory over all of His enemies which included death and the grave. Another word for the grave is Hades or sheol in the Old Testament. Because Jesus has won that victory when He comes again death and the grave shall be hurled into the Lake of Fire, along with Satan and all of his rebellious cohorts and all who have not believed in Christ and given Him glory and honor. Jesus has won that victory over death and that's why when Paul speaks of the death of a believer he doesn't use that radical, frightening term *thanatos* which means separation. He talks about a believer falling asleep when

they die because Jesus has won the victory so he uses that euphemism to calm us and let us know that death is not the end for us but it brings us into the presence of God.

The best illustration I can give you for this is one that I have used before. When I was a kid they had these scary movies they would play on Friday nights. I would beg my dad and mom "Let me stay up and watch the late show." Every once in a while my dad would relent and let me stay up and watch the late show. I had my own Tupperware bowl that I would put Oreo cookies and ice cream in and the show would start at 11:30pm and I maybe would make it to 12:15am. I would always fall asleep in front of the television but I never woke up the next morning in the den in front of the television. I always woke up the next morning in my bed. I know what happened. My father would come down after I had fallen asleep, pick me up and put me where I belonged. That's what happens to a believer when you die. You have fallen asleep in Christ and He brings you into His presence for all eternity. It's that picture that the Apostle Paul is giving us concerning death.

What did we learn about death in the last study? I'll just enumerate them for you. Number one, death means separation. Number two, death is birthed by God as divine judgment upon man's sin. Number three, death is universal. All men must die unless you are alive when Christ comes back or unless you are one of the two exceptions in the Old Testament of Enoch and the prophet Elijah. The curse of sin brings death as God brings His divine judgment and the Bible teaches that sin brings three kinds of death or separations. Man is made of two parts – his body and soul. When God made the first Adam He made him a body from the dust of the ground and then He breathed into him the breath of life and he became a living soul. So the two are put together like two threads woven into one cloth. What is death? It is the unnatural separation of the body and the soul which were not made to be separated. Another kind of death is noted in Ephesians 2 that we were born dead in our sins. It's a spiritual death where we were born separated from God because of our sin record and our sin nature. Then there is eternal death where God says "Depart from Me you workers of lawlessness for I never knew you" and there's this separation from God for all eternity in the place of judgment called Ghenna or the lake of fire which is the final hell that the Bible describes.

Death is not only universal, inevitable, it humbles all, it is three fold but fifthly death is an enemy. It is unnatural yet it is necessary for flesh and blood will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Because of sin death is now necessary for our bodies to be transformed from what they are now where this mortal puts on immortality that is my body. My soul is already immortal but my body shall put on immortality. The corrupt shall put on the incorruptible for flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. So it's an enemy and unnatural but now God has worked it into His necessary plan for the process of resurrecting for us a new body with this old body returning to the dust and then a resurrected body for the new heavens and the new earth. Number six, death is temporal and will be put to

death. Death is not forever. Death came with sin and it will end at the second coming of Christ when He throws death into hell. Number seven, we learned that death is separation but it's not the end. I've heard people say "Well they've died I guess that's the end." No, that is not the end. That is the end of the existence of this temporal, physical realm as it is but it's not the end. We are made to be immortal. Death brings an end to this existence as it is here but it is not the end. So where is it that we go?

That is what we call the intermediate state and that's what are study is now. Let's look at II Corinthians 5. Let's build on what we have just read in I Thessalonians. The Scriptures tell us that this earthly tent will be set aside. II Corinthians 5:1-5 says

1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed (dies), we have a building from God (a new body from God), a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For in this tent (our body now) we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, 3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked (God will clothe us for eternity with a new body for the new heavens and the new earth and this old body, this old tent, will be taken away). 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 (we don't just long to put off this body we long to put on that new body for the new heavens and the new earth), 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.

The Holy Spirit is the pledge to you that God is going to do a work for you to give you a new body in the new heavens and the new earth. Let's continue. II Corinthians 5:6-10 says

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.

Remember when the Apostle Paul said he didn't know whether to pray to be put to death or to stay? He was betwixt and between. He said he would really like to die because he knew absent from the body meant he was present with the Lord but then he thought he should pray to stay here for the benefit of God's people because God may have something for him to do in their life and that's what Paul is referring to in verse 8. What did we just learn about people who die? We learned that they have gone home. Where are you? You are not home. We are strangers. We're aliens. We're on a green card while we're here. Home with the

Lord is what is inside of us. We long to be there and we long to put this off to be with Him. Our desire is to be home with Him. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

What does it mean to be with the Lord? Where is the Lord? The Lord is at the right hand of the Father. Where is Jesus? He is with the Father. Where is Jesus with the Father? They are in the heavens or in paradise or it's also called Abraham's bosom. Those are all interchangeable terms. Let's look at II Corinthians 12. So when I die I go to be with the Lord. So where will I be? II Corinthians 12:1-3 says

1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. (Remember Paul was an Apostle so he was given visions and dreams in order to communicate truth to us and now he refers to himself in a non-boastful way.) 2 I know a man (Paul is referring to himself.) in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

What would be the third heaven? If we work our way through the Hebrew view of life the first heaven would be the atmosphere. The second heavens would be beyond the atmosphere which would be the realm of the stars and the universe. The third heaven would be the dwelling place of God, the throne of God with the seraphim and the cherubim and the seated throne of Jesus Christ who has ascended and enthroned.

Also remember another word for the third heavens is paradise and paradise is the presence of the Lord. It's not a different place like some would teach you. It's not a separate place. It's like the pastor's home. With Baptists the preacher's home is called the parsonage and with the Presbyterians the preacher's home is called the manse. A parsonage is where a parson lives. A manse is to be a reflection of the Lord's term "I go to prepare a place for you" as in the mansions of glory. Don't think of mansions as an expensive place it just means a comfortable dwelling place where you are at home. So these are referring to the same thing it's just two different titles. When Bible talks about elders sometimes they are referred to as shepherds or stewards or pastors or bishops or overseers. It calls them different titles because of their multifaceted dynamics. The same thing is true of the presence of the Lord. Sometimes it is called heaven, the third heaven, paradise, or Abraham's bosom. Those aren't separate places they are just interchangeable terms, just as it is in this text.

Let me ask you to share with me our confessional statement. This is what we believe the Bible teaches about the intermediate state. "After death, the bodies of human beings decompose and return to dust but their souls which do not die or

sleep have an immortal existence and immediately return to God who created them. The souls of the righteous are then perfected in holiness and are received into the highest heavens where they behold the face of God in light and glory and wait for the full redemption of their bodies. The souls of the wicked are thrown into hell where they remain in torment and complete darkness, set apart for the great Day of Judgment. Scripture recognizes only these two places and no other for the souls of those separated from their bodies.”

So where is a believer when they die? Their soul in a spiritual existence goes to be with the Lord. What about an unbeliever? Their soul goes to torment, to an intermediate state of torment. It is not the final state just as my dwelling is not the final dwelling in this heaven because God has a final state called the new heavens and the new earth. God has a final state for unbelievers called the lake of fire but there is an intermediate state which immediately those who have died go, depending on whether they are in Christ or apart from Christ. Where does their body go? It returns to the dust awaiting its resurrection. Then the believer gets a resurrection body for the new heavens and the new earth and the unbeliever gets a resurrected body that is fit for eternal condemnation. Both then have that resurrected body before that great Day of Judgment and then the final state is the new heavens and new earth or hell itself.

So what are we learning about believers? When they die they go to be with the Lord. They are absent from the body and present with the Lord. We lay aside the earthly tent to come home to be present with the Lord. They are in a state of spiritual perfection in righteousness and holiness. In other words, I believe that believers, after we die, will grow in knowledge and wisdom in one sense but in terms of our existence spiritually we will be perfect without sin and even the ability to sin. Let's look at Hebrews 12:22-24 which says

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

So as we enter into the Kingdom of God and its consummate glory and the presence of the King, we enter in with the angels and their perfections. We enter into the face of God in light and glory. It has to be veiled because no man can look upon Him and live, even the angels have wings to cover their eyes but we are there before the Lord in His light and glory. We are there in a perfected state of no sin, of perfect righteousness and no ability to sin. There in is our everlasting existence before the One true and living God. That is where we find ourselves as believers. So when we die we go to be with the Lord in heaven or paradise or Abraham's bosom. We then go into a state of spiritual perfection in righteousness and holiness and we are at home with great joy, unspeakable. We're home with

the Lord and we are awaiting a resurrected body and a final judgment that will send us God's new heavens and new earth. That is what we are yet awaiting. We will have a spiritual existence until we get the resurrected body.

Will we be able to communicate? It seems as though the Bible indicates that we will be able to communicate in some forms of recognition. Of course, angels have spiritual bodies so it should not amaze us but we go to be with the Lord in the heavens or paradise. Do you remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross in Luke 23? Jesus said to him, "Today you shall be with Me in paradise." Where's paradise? It's the third heaven, the presence of the Lord. That's where you will be as a believer.

Jesus gives us some insights on this in Luke 16. Here we are given some insight on the intermediate state with the rich man and with Lazarus. This is a familiar story. 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.

(Here he takes the father of those who have been called out of darkness into light – we are children of Abraham – those who have been circumcised not in the flesh but in the heart – so we are carried to His side to be with Him.)

The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, 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.'"

Here we see this affirmation of this intermediate state. The body is buried. The poor man, Lazarus, is in the presence of the Lord and as he is there he is in a state of perfection, comfort, joy, at home, and awaiting the final judgment and the resurrection. This place of the grave, Hades, also includes a place of torment. It is there that the rich man finds himself.

Now, what do we know about unbelievers in the intermediate state? Number one is that they are already in a place of judgment and of separation. The Scriptures tell us in Matthew 8 that they are in a place of torment and rage. Why would I put rage there? What does the Bible say of those who go into the judgment of God in torment do? There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. When I was a child and used to read that I thought "They get right there to hell even in the intermediate state and there they have remorse because there is weeping and gnashing of teeth." But that's not actually what it is saying. It is a temper tantrum. Do you remember when Stephen was being stoned? It said they were gnashing their teeth upon him. This is not the gnashing of teeth that's painful. This is the gnashing of teeth in gritting of rebellion against God and the weeping is not remorse. It is one of rage and rebellion against God. Hell does not bring repentance. All you have to do is look at this text. It further highlights rage, their torment and their anger against God in this final separation. There is no repentance.

What did the rich man do with Lazarus when he lived? He used him. He was an object of voyeurism. He let his dogs lick the sores. He was just there. Now, the rich man is in hell and do you see any repentance over what he did with Lazarus? No. Now he wants Lazarus to be his water boy, his runner, his messenger. There is no repentance. Hell does not bring repentance. It highlights the rage of men and women and rebellion against God. Oh, the knee will bow but it won't be a bowing of the knee in repentance. It will be the weeping and gnashing of teeth in anger against God, even in this intermediate state which is not even the last state, the lake of fire which we will study later. So there is no hope and no repentance. The chasm is fixed and there's no second chance, none whatsoever. They await also a final judgment and a final separation in a place called hell with a resurrected body that is designed for everlasting torment. That is what is brought before us in the text of the intermediate state.

In 1439 at the council of Florence, the Roman Catholic Church invented from extra Biblical literature this notion of purgatory and then it reaffirmed it about 60 to 70 years later at the council of Trent. In this text you see no purgatory that you go into where you can atone for sins or that someone can pray you out or that someone can give offerings or merits for you. You see none of that. The die is cast and when we die as we await the judgment you are either a believer or an unbeliever. If you are a believer you are in an intermediate state of being home in the presence of the Lord, in the perfections of righteousness awaiting the resurrected body in the new heavens and the new earth. If you are an unbeliever in the intermediate state you are in torment and rage against God and the chasm

is fixed in the position that you find yourself with judgment yet there to affirm why you are there in the glory of God and the salvation of sinners in the judgment of those who are opposed to Him.

I want to give you three takeaways from these passages of Scripture. The first one is there is no purgatory, no limbo, no soul sleep and no re-incarnation. That is not found in the Scripture whatsoever. Secondly, the intermediate state is not the final state. There awaits a resurrected body, a judgment, a lake of fire which is a place called Ghenna, the final state of the unbeliever and there awaits the new heavens and the new earth in the presence and glory of the Lord forever. It's an intermediate state, it's not the final state. Thirdly and finally, it's inescapable and irreversible which means today is the day of salvation. Come and know the Lord. I can tell you today if you are not in Christ that you may come to Christ and know that if Jesus doesn't come, your death will be a triumphal procession into the presence of the Lord.

What is the most favorite passage of Scripture that people choose for funerals for believers usually? There are two of them and one of them is John 14:1-4 which says

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. 4 And you know the way to where I am going.

Then He talks about the mansions He will prepare for us and we'll be home with Him. What's the second passage? It is Psalm 23 and I love the part that says "Though I walk through the valley of the *shadow* of death..." That's what believers go through. When they die they go through the shadow of death.

I like the way Donald G. Barnhouse, the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, illustrated it one time. He was coming back from a funeral and his grandson had been with him. He had read the passage from Psalm 23 and his grandson was asking him "What is the valley of the shadow of death?" About that time he was parked at a stoplight in the city and this gigantic truck came right along beside of them. When it came along side of them it totally blocked out the vista of the sun and so they were then in the shadow of the truck. He said to his grandson, "It has gotten kind of dark hasn't it?" The boy said, "Yes." He said, "Why did it get dark?" The boy said, "The truck pulled up and it's blocking the sun." He said, "So we're in the shadow of the truck." The boy said, "Yes, that's it." He said, "Son, how would you like for that truck to hit you?" The boy said, "I wouldn't like that because that would hurt." He said, "I agree with you. That truck pulled up and its shadow just hit you. Did that hurt?" The boy said, "No." That would be tough to face that truck but the shadow of the truck, that's nothing but a momentary darkness.

Jesus Christ has won the victory over our sin and death so if you know Him and Jesus hasn't yet come back you'll come through the valley of the shadow of death into the presence of the Lord. Today is the day of salvation. Come to the One who gives you the victory that you may be in His presence forever. What happens after the intermediate state? You already have a feeling for it and it's called the judgment. We'll talk about that in our next study. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You so much for the Lord Jesus and the privilege to be in Your Word and to know it, love it, study it and follow it. Thank You for the Lord Jesus who has won the victory. Thank You for that marvelous little text in the Gospels of that resurrection of believers at the time of the resurrection of Jesus to remind us that He's the first fruits. Father, I thank You also that we who are assured of the resurrection of our bodies and when we die we go into the presence of the Lord and we know that joy even with the anticipation of a new heavens and a new earth but our hearts ache for those who are apart from Christ who face an everlasting judgment, one that only highlights our sins and rebellion and one that declares by no means You will leave the guilty unpunished. God, our God would You allow us in this day of salvation to cast the Gospel net to our family, friends and neighbors and draw them to Christ that they may land on the celestial shore in the presence of the Savior. Father, may I ask You for those who have said no to sin, self, the evil one, the world, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the boastful pride of life and yes to Jesus, we look for that day when we don't need to grow anymore for we will be perfected in righteousness and holiness before the face and glory and light of the Lord. But until that day thank You for Your patience and keep growing us that we might be more like our Savior and I thank You in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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