

MESSAGE ON THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

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INTRODUCTION

- We are reluctant to think about it because it proves how very frail and vulnerable we all are. (Ps 39:4; Eccles 8:8)
- Its arrival is usually unexpected and unwelcome.
- It is frightening to most people, and it is often painful.
- **IT IS DEATH!**
- Listen to what Job's friend, Bildad, said about the death of the wicked man: *"He is torn from the security of his tent and they march him before the king of terrors."*(Job 18:14)
- Is anything more frightening to more people than death?
- Fear of the certain coming of death makes men and women lifelong slaves.
- Hebrews 2:15 tells us that Jesus laboured, *to deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives."*
- Many find the thought of death so utterly terrifying that they refuse to think about it or prepare for it in any way, even when its near approach becomes very obvious.
- Some dying of terminal illnesses refuse to accept the reality of something they find so terrifyingly unbearable to contemplate.
- And yet for many it is not the experience of dying that fills people with such dread, because:
 - death is often painless or the pain is mercifully brief, and
 - the pain of even the most prolonged and difficult death can usually be controlled to a large extent with pain killing drugs.
- So it is not dying itself that is the terror, and neither is it the fear of dying without leaving our affairs in order, else we would all put them in order and keep them that way.
- **What terrifies many is the grim uncertainty and the terrible fearfulness of what lies just beyond the gate of death, for those who pass through it.**
- In recent years, some have tried to see beyond death by gathering information about near-death experiences. Most of us find such accounts interesting, but:
 1. the value of the information that they provide is doubtful, however interesting it may be;

2. **all these accounts come to us from people who have not really died, if we understand death as a final and complete separation from one's physical body;**

3. **and even if they are accepted as reliable, reports of near-death experiences provide very little information about what follows death.**

- For many centuries, the truth about what comes after death was surrounded by mystery and uncertainty for the whole world, and even for the devout Jews of Old Testament times.
- The Hebrew Scriptures contain hints that physical death is not the end of life.
- For example, Proverbs 14:32 says, "*The righteous has a refuge when he dies*" (cf. Ho 13:14)
- And there were Old Testament personalities whose strong personal trust in God made them think that that death could not be the end.
- For example, Job said, "*Even after my skin is destroyed, yet apart from my flesh [not from my flesh] I shall see God.*" (Job 19:26)
- But such hints and flashes of personal faith did not have the comforting, reassuring force of clear plain teaching.
- Many of God's people, and even the devout among them, were troubled by the uncertainty of what comes after death.
- The Scriptures record some of their doubts and fears on the subject.
- Here are a few examples of such troubled thoughts on the subject of death and what follows it. The first three record the thoughts of Job:
- Job 14:7-12

*"For there is hope for a tree,
when it is cut down,
that it will sprout again,
and its shoots will not fail.*

*Though its roots grow old in the ground,
and its stump dies in the dry soil,*

*At the scent of water it will flourish
and put forth sprigs like a plant.*

But man dies and lies prostrate.

Man expires and where is he?

*As water evaporates from the sea,
and a river becomes parched and dried up,*

So man lies down and does not rise.

*Until the heavens be no more, he will not awake
nor be aroused out of his sleep."*

- Job 14:14 "*If a man dies, will he live again?*"

- Job 10:21f “—*I go – and shall not return – to the land of darkness and deep shadow; the land of utter gloom as darkness itself; of deep shadow without order --.*”
- Ps 146:4 “*His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.*” (cf. Ps 89:47f)
- Eccles 3:20 “*All go to the same place. All come from the dust and all return to the dust. Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward, and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?*”
- It was uncertainty about what follows death that led many Old Testament writers to express their distress at the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the upright in this life.
- In Jesus’ lifetime the Jewish sect called the Sadducees believed that there is no such thing as a spirit in man and no life after death.
- Today the Jehovah’s Witness cult has focused on certain Old Testament passages and concluded from them that death ends everything, except for the few individuals whom God will recreate, out of nothing but His memory of them.
- Their error in this is typical of their misguided way of explaining away what is clear in scripture by means of what is less clear.
- But the fact that sincere people can come to such conclusions on the basis of some Old Testament Scriptures demonstrates that the Old Testament is far less clear than we might like it to be about the survival of the human spirit after death.
- Thank God that our knowledge about what comes after death is not limited to the Old Testament!
- Jesus gives us much fuller knowledge about many subjects that are unclear, or incompletely explained, in the Old Testament.
- Paul says in 2 Tim 1:10 that, “*Jesus – abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*”
- And in 1 Cor 15 (22, 26, 56f) Paul explains how Jesus took the sting out of death.
- With one simple argument based on the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus proved to the Sadducees that people live on after physical death.
- He did this by pointing out that the Scriptures call God the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These men must still be alive after their physical death, or their God is the God of dead men. Jesus’ point is that if death could annihilate even His chosen ones, He wouldn’t be much of a God, would he? (Mt 22:31)
- Other students of the Scriptures, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, believe that after death we all sleep in the grave until the general resurrection of the dead.

- They base this conclusion on New Testament Scriptures that use the word ‘sleep’ to refer to physical death.
- For example:
 - Mt 9:24 “*The girl is not dead but is asleep.*”
 - 1 Cor 15:2 “*Now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.*”
 - 1 Thes 4:14 “*God will bring with Him [that is, with Jesus] those who have fallen asleep in Jesus*” (cf. 1 Cor 11:30)
- But other portions of scripture indicate that it is wrong to take literally such uses of the words ‘asleep’ or ‘sleep’.
- Such passages refer to death as sleep **for two good reasons**:
 - **first**, because death looks like sleep. The Scriptures are using the language of appearance here. In the same way, we say that the sun rises, instead of saying, more precisely, that it becomes visible above the horizon as the earth rotates;
 - **second**, death is referred to as sleep because physical death, like sleep, is temporary.
- The idea that the ‘dead in Christ’ stay unconscious or asleep until the resurrection makes nonsense of other Scriptures.
- For example, in Phil 1:23f, Paul writes, “*I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.*” (Cf. 1 Pe 3:19)
- Paul is saying quite clearly that for him, being with Jesus is the alternative to staying on in his physical body in this life.
- But if death just means sleeping until the resurrection, surely there is no point in wanting to die right away to be with Jesus.
- If we have to sleep after death, it would be better to live a long life, do all the things we would like to do, and *then* die, so as to waste less time sleeping in the dust.
- If death is just sleep, it certainly isn’t better than living longer and doing useful and good things while life lasts.
- Of course, Jesus taught that there would be a resurrection of both the righteous (Jn 6:39, 44) and the unrighteous (Rev 20:12f).

TRANSITION

But the main question before us is: *What lies just beyond death, or between death and physical resurrection from the dead?*

If it is neither annihilation (the end of existence), nor sleep in the ground, what is it?

What will be our experience during this in-between period that is usually called 'the intermediate state'?

- Jewish theologians of Jesus' day believed, and Jesus taught, that in the intermediate state the godly and the ungodly are conscious and separated into two groups; and each group receives a foretaste of their eternal destiny.
- Five different New Testament words or phrases refer to the intermediate state, and we will now look briefly at what they teach us about it.

THE FIRST WORD DESCRIBING THE INTERMEDIATE STATE IS 'HADES'

- The Greek word 'hades' is used 10 times in the New Testament. Unfortunately, it is incorrectly translated in the KJV as 'hell'. Hades and hell are not the same place, as we will see.
- Another Greek word, 'gehenna,' is also translated, 'hell,' and it is the only New Testament word that properly designates what we think of as hell, the place of eternal suffering.
- Some Bible translations use the English word 'hades' when the Greek original says 'hades,' and the English word 'hell' when the Greek original says gehenna. Unfortunately, the NIV is inconsistent in its translation of the Greek word 'hades', calling it either hades or hell in different passages.
- **[READ Lk 16:19-31]** In this passage Jesus tells us about a rich man who died and found himself in hades (not hell).
- Note what verses 23-26 say:

“And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.

And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and your are in agony.

And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'

- We can learn several things about the intermediate state from this passage:
 - First, it is not hell, because life goes on in the world of the living, and the rich man asks that his living brothers be warned to avoid joining him in this terrible place, hades. Other

Scriptures indicate that no one will be put into hell until after the final judgement, and at that time it will be too late to warn anyone.

- Because the resurrection has not occurred yet, those in hades are disembodied spirits, *but they have experiences equivalent to physical sight and the physical sensation of extreme heat causing pain.*
- *Hades is a place of torment for the wicked.*
- *Those in torment can glimpse the joy of saints like Lazarus and Abraham, but have no hope of sharing in it.*
- *In fact seeing the joy of others seems to be part of the horror of their own situation.*
- *Hades is not a purgatory, a place of cleansing through suffering, for none of those tormented there can cross over and join Abraham. Once there, there is no changing your mind or getting out.*
- *The New Testament teaches other things about hades.*
- *Rev 6:8 says that hades follows death.*
- *Rev 1:18 says that Jesus, not Satan, has the keys of hades, and so determines who is imprisoned there.*
- *Rev 20:10-15 teaches that at the general resurrection, hades will give up its dead for the final judgement, and then anyone whose name is not written in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire.*
- *1 Pe 3:19 seems to be talking about hades when it mentions “the spirits [now] in prison.”*
- *So hades appears to be the intermediate state of those who are excluded from God’s mercy.*
- *The fact is not well known, but a number of people who have reported personal near-death experiences have described them as hellish and terrifying. This seems to confirm what Jesus teaches about hades.*
- *But what is the intermediate state of those who are accepted by God and enjoy His mercy and blessing?*

THIS BRINGS US TO THE SECOND NEW TESTAMENT EXPRESSION DESCRIBING THE INTERMEDIATE STATE, ‘ABRAHAM’S SIDE’ or ‘ABRAHAM’S BOSOM’(depending on which translation you use).

- This difficult-to-translate Greek phrase is used in Luke 16 (vss. 22-26) to describe the place where Lazarus was with Abraham.

- This phrase, literally: ‘into Abraham’s breast or embrace,’ implies that Lazarus was being held or hugged by Abraham. He was being comforted, by that great giant of faith – comforted at last for all the suffering he experienced in his earthly life.
- Angels carried Lazarus to this wonderful place of comfort and joy.
- Abraham was known to the Jews as the father of their nation, and the father of all believers in his God.
- The implication here is that all those who truly trust in God as Abraham did, and have a right to call Abraham their father, enjoy his company after death while awaiting their resurrection in new physical bodies.
- This place was quite separate from Hades, the place of torment where the rich man was held.

THIS BRINGS US TO THE THIRD NEW TESTAMENT EXPRESSION DESCRIBING THE INTERMEDIATE STATE, “PARADISE.”

- In Lk 23:42-43 we read that one of the two thieves crucified with Jesus said, ***“Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.”*** Jesus replied, ***“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”***
- The word, ‘paradise,’ used here does not mean ‘heaven’ even though it has somehow come to have that meaning in English. Jesus did not return to His Father in heaven on that day, the day of His death, but after His resurrection.
- So what does the word, paradise, mean?
- Paradise is an ancient Persian word that describes something somewhere between a garden and a park. The word implies beauty and bounty. It brings to mind the Garden of Eden from which our first parents were expelled.
- Jesus kept His promise to the dying thief. That very day, the day on which He and the thief died, before He rose from the dead, the two of them were together in a place that can best be described as a garden.
- In paradise the forgiven thief was disembodied and conscious, and enjoyed Jesus’ company in a place of beauty and bounty.
- ***I believe that this word, paradise, is another way of describing, in physical language that we can understand, the indescribable reality of the intermediate state for those who belong to Jesus.***
- God’s people will all be there with that former thief and not one of us will object to his criminal past!
- Paul’s words in 2 Cor 12:4 about his being caught up into paradise imply the present reality of that place, and indicate that Paul, somehow, got a glimpse of it before his death.
- Rev 2:7 promises a place in God’s paradise for overcomers, people who are victorious in their struggle to stay loyal to Jesus.

THE FOURTH NEW TESTAMENT PHRASE DESCRIBING THE INTERMEDIATE STATE IS, “AT HOME WITH THE LORD.”

- In 2 Cor 5:6 & 8 Paul says, “*Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord -- we -- prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.*”
- In this way Paul expressed his own belief concerning the intermediate state that lay ahead for him.
- By saying ‘we’, Paul expressed his confidence that his readers held the same view concerning their future.
- Praise God, we have only two options, if we know Jesus as our saviour: **to be at home in the body, OR to be at home with our Lord, Jesus.**
- Paul was making the obvious point that it is better to be with the Lord Jesus than to remain in our physical bodies.
- He is not speaking about what comes after our physical resurrection from the dead, because then we will be **in our new resurrection bodies and with our Lord.**
- Paul is saying that *after separation from our bodies by death, we will be in the presence of Jesus as disembodied spirits; and being in his company will more than compensate us for our temporary lack of physical bodies.*

THE FIFTH AND LAST NEW TESTAMENT PHRASE FOR THE INTERMEDIATE STATE IS, “UNDERNEATH THE ALTAR.”

- In Rev 6:9f John the apostle writes, “*I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained;*
- *and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’*”
- This passage describes the souls of men who are located under the altar in God’s heavenly throne room.
- They have been martyred for their loyalty to Jesus.
- They remain disembodied spirits because the resurrection has not yet taken place.
- John is using picture language to describe invisible spiritual realities.
- These people he describes here could include every believer whose physical life has ended, however they happened to die.
- Let me explain the reasoning by which I reach this conclusion.
- Jesus taught that all His faithful followers would be hated and persecuted by the world (e.g. Mk 13:13; Jn 3:20; 15:19-21); He also taught that hatred is

equivalent to murder (1 Jn 3:15, cf. Mt 5:21ff), so, in a metaphorical sense, all His faithful followers are ‘martyrs’.

- What does the phrase ‘under the altar’ tell us about the intermediate state of such martyrs, people who pay the price that this world demands of those who are loyal to Jesus?
 - They are clean in God’s sight because the altar represents cleansing and they are under it.
 - They enjoy the continual presence of God Almighty without guilt or fear.
 - They have the privilege of speaking to God and being heard by Him.
 - They continually appeal to Him to judge the wicked.

CONCLUSIONS

- What general conclusions can we draw from our little journey just beyond the veil of death into the intermediate state?
 1. A very great deal is at stake when you and I decide whether or not Jesus will be our saviour and master in this life.
 2. The consequences of our choice, one way or the other, will be clear to each of us immediately after our physical death, while we await the general resurrection, and the judgement of all people living and dead.
 3. Which will it be for you, the horrors of hades, or being in paradise, at home with the Lord?
 4. As of this moment, each of us still has the luxury of choice. Anyone who hasn’t already received and accepted Jesus, can do it very simply right now. There are no good reasons for saying no.
 5. The only time anyone has for accepting Jesus is the present. For any one of us, this could be the last day, or even the last hour of life.
 6. Some scripture passages may now seem clearer to you than they were before, for example:
 - 1 Thes 5:10 “*[He] died for us that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with Him.*”
 - Jesus’ words to Martha at her brother’s graveside recorded in Jn 11:26: “*Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?*”
 - Then there is the teaching in Hebrews 12:23 that the Church includes “*the spirits of just men made perfect*”. All departed saints remain conscious members of the Church after their death.

- Lastly, Hebrews 12:1 says that a great cloud of witnesses is watching the lives and struggles of those who serve Jesus. Chapter 11 tells us who is included in that large crowd; it lists many of the heroes of the faith who have preceded us through the doors of death and into the intermediate state. They are waiting for us to join them. The fascinating thing is that while we can't see them, apparently they can see our struggles, and they are watching us.
6. When the gate of death opens at last, it will be either a welcome friend, or a dreaded enemy. Which will it be for you?