

What Happens Between Death and Resurrection?

Summary: *Those who die in Christ will immediately be in His presence while they expectantly await the resurrection which will occur at His return.*

Jesus Christ is the hope and treasure of Christians, and it is our deepest desire to be with Him. Whether this is accomplished with His return or our death, we long to be near Him and experience the fullness of joy and eternal pleasure that His presence offers (Psalm 16:11).

Though some might conceive of eternity as a disembodied existence in the heavens, such is not the language of the Scriptures. Rather, the Scriptures portray our hope as involving the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23), that is resurrection.¹ This hope, however, will not be accomplished at death, but will be consummated in conjunction with the return of Christ at the end of the age.² So, what is it that happens during the intermediate period between death and our resurrection at Christ's glorious appearing?

Before dealing with the hope of believers during this period, we should first tackle the idea that is often espoused of a second chance to trust the gospel for those who have not done so in this life. According to this theory, some, if not all people will have another opportunity to respond to the person and work of Christ after death. While this theory might make the concept of eternal punishment more palatable, it simply does not find support within the biblical text. Rather, the Scripture is clear that "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."³

Furthermore, we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16 in which we find the following: "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."⁴ The idea of a second opportunity to respond to the gospel simply does not reflect the teaching of Scripture. This

truth should thus drive us to more passionately proclaim the excellencies of Him Who calls us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

Transitioning back to the intermediate period for believers, it is sometimes stated that we will undergo what is called "soul sleep." This means that at death we experience a type of unconsciousness only to be awakened at the resurrection. However, this theory does not accord with what we find in the Bible. Rather, we see that believers will spend the intermediate period within the presence of our Lord.

Evidencing this truth is the promise which Jesus makes to the thief on the cross that "today" they would be together in paradise (Luke 23:43) and also Paul's expression of his hope at death to "depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:22-24). Even clearer is the testimony of 2 Corinthians 5:1-9:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. 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, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.⁵

2 Corinthians 5:1-9

Within this text Paul identifies three distinct stages of existence for the believer: life in this tent, nakedness, and a heavenly dwelling. By understanding the importance of each of these stages, we may properly recognize the hope of the intermediate period.

The first stage which Paul mentions is "the tent" which is also called "our earthly home." This represents our physical bodies within this current life. In this life, sickness and suffering, effects

¹ John 5:28-29 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.

² 1 Corinthians 15:22-23 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

³ Hebrews 9:27

⁴ We might also mention 2 Corinthians 5:10 which speaks of being judged for those things done "in the body" which we will soon see as a reference to this current life.

⁵ I am challenged by Paul's words here and in Philippians 1:22-24 in which he expresses his "desire" to die so that he might be with Christ. He says that he would "much rather" be with Christ and that such would be "far better" than our current existence. Any hesitancy on our part to agree with him should be carefully examined in hopes that we might see Jesus as our great treasure and the fulfillment of all of our yearning.

of a fallen world, are called burdens and thus “we groan.” This language mirrors Romans 8:23 which speaks of creation’s groaning as it awaits freedom which will come at the redemption of our bodies. Because of this burden and the fact that we are on earth while Christ is in heaven, we desire to be released from this current body and with Him.

Being away from the body and “home with the Lord” is surely preferable to the burdens of this present life and yet it is not the fullness of our hope. Rather such a stage is likened to being “naked.” What Paul is saying here is that man was always created to exist as body and soul and that spiritual existence without a physical body is incomplete, though better than life away from the Lord in this present burdened body. As our bodies lie in the dust of the earth, our spirits in heaven are “unclothed” and our redemption is incomplete. We await something more.

The ultimate hope is not merely that we would be “unclothed” by our current body, but rather that we would be “further clothed” by a “heavenly dwelling.” This occurs at the resurrection and is the consummation of our longing. We do not desire an ethereal existence, but rather the reality of bodies and souls united again and dwelling eternally on the new earth in the presence of our great King Who dwells in our midst.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Revelation 21.1-7

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