

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Church and Last Things, Session 12, Death and the Intermediate State

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on Doctrines of the Church and Last Things. This is session 12, Death and the Intermediate State.

We continue our study of last things. We introduced eschatology by thinking about the two ages, the present age and the age to come, the New Testament kingdom of God in its three dimensions, its inauguration at Jesus' earthly ministry, its expansion in his reign at God's right hand, and its culmination yet in the future. Then, the most important single contribution of New Testament studies to last things, maybe in the whole 20th century, is the already and the not yet. Pardon my pun, but already, the Princeton biblical theologian Gerhardus Vos had these principles, although the invention of it is credited to the Oscar Cullmann in his writings.

And indeed, he had it, but not before the Princetonian did, not before Vos. Next, Death and the Intermediate State. According to scripture, death is not natural but unnatural.

According to 1 Corinthians 15:26, we read that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Death is our enemy. Enemy.

Revelation 14:13, in the context of a passage dealing with hell and the wicked having no rest day or night when they're in that situation, when they're in that place and condition, Revelation 14:13, and I heard a voice from heaven saying, write this, blessed are the dead. Now, that is a strange statement. Truly happy are the dead.

Are you kidding me? You have to keep reading. Blessed are the dead who die. Blessed are the dead who die.

It's the same thing. No, it isn't. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Union with Christ does not stop at death. Believers die in the Lord. Union with Christ is unbreakable, and our union with him is inseparable, and it extends beyond this life into the next.

Blessed indeed says the spirit that they may rest from their labors for their deeds follow them. The wicked have no rest day or night in hell but experience torment forever and ever because of the wine that they drink; they experience the wine of God's wrath poured full strength into the cup of his anger and will be tormented day and night forever and ever. By contrast, the righteous will have rest forever.

The righteous, even in death, overcome the last enemy because of union with Christ, because they die in the Lord. That's already overcoming. The not-yet overcoming is in the resurrection of the body, of course.

According to scripture, death is not natural but unnatural. It's the last enemy. 1 Corinthians 15:26.

Although even now in the already, believers die in the Lord and are truly happy. Death and the fear of death are the result of sin. Genesis 2:17 warns of the penalty for sin.

Genesis 2:17. The Lord tells Adam that the tree of you may surely eat in the context of every tree in the garden of the garden. Total affirmation, all positives, one prohibition.

You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die. Genesis 2:17 warns of the penalty for sin. Death.

Genesis 3:19 declares the death sentence. Adam and Eve foolishly hide from God, who seeks them out. That's tremendous.

He seeks them out. He said he tells the man Genesis 3:19 by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you are taken for you are dust. And to dust, you shall return.

That is the warning, the excuse me, the declaration of the death sentence on Adam and Eve. The execution of the sentence is given in Genesis 3:8. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord.

Immediately, they died spiritually, and they hid from God. In time, because God wanted them to propagate the earth, the race. In time, they died physically, immediate spiritual death.

We think then forgiveness and spiritual life are already in God's confrontation with them and the promise of a Redeemer. Genesis 5:5. Thus, all the days that Adam lived were 930 years. And he died.

Genesis 17 witnessed God's giving the warning for the penalty of sin, death. God declared a death sentence on Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:19. The execution of a sentence occurred in 38.

We're both our first parents hid from God. I believe Eve's death is not mentioned specifically. But Adams is in Genesis 5:5 his physical death.

Death and the fear of death are the result of sin. The fear of death is the result of sin. Hebrews 2:15.

As a matter of fact, let me go to 1 John 4. Because Hebrews then gives the solution. 1 John 4 speaks 4:18.

1 John 4:18. There is no fear in love, in God's love. But perfect love casts out fear.

For fear has to do with punishment. And whoever fears has not been perfected in love. Love is perfected by this, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment.

Because as he is, so are we in the world. It is perfectly proper for Christians to be uneasy about their mortality. We don't have to pretend to be super spiritual beings.

We aren't. Who wants to die in the sense of leaving one's family, one's friends, one's church family, maybe even your job or other things you enjoy, your hobbies, or your life? Of course, we desire to be with Christ.

Paul calls it far better in Philippians chapter 1. But being uneasy about one's mortality and death is natural. What is this fear that perfect love casts out? It's a fear of punishment. It's a fear of judgment.

We don't have to be afraid of that. Because God loves us in his son, and he has cast out that fear of death, which involves punishment. Hebrews 2:14 and 15 explain further.

Since, therefore, the children, in the context of the two verses before from Isaiah, it means something like the elect, something like that, share in flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise partook of the same things the son did, flesh and blood, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. Human beings fear death, and I'm not just talking about mortality. They fear meeting God deep in their hearts.

They fear the judgment of God. As a matter of fact, if they do, it's a good thing because it can drive them to the gospel. But Christ came and shared in humanity.

He became a representative by sharing blood and flesh in Greek literally, although you can't translate that way into the receptor language, which doesn't say blood and flesh. It says flesh and blood, so that's how it is. Since, therefore, the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, flesh and blood.

Why? So, he could die and, through death, do two things in this passage: destroy the devil and deliver God's people. Jesus enables us to overcome the fear of the judgment of death and the penalty of death because of his grace and our faith in him. Furthermore, death is both spiritual and physical.

Ephesians 2:1 to 3: I think it's the greatest passage dealing with our three enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. Well, the recipients of this letter, whether it was a circular letter that came to Ephesus and other cities or just to Ephesus, regardless, the believers were very much alive.

How can he say you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked? He says it again in verse 5: when we were dead in our trespasses, he means they were spiritually dead. They were devoid of the of the life of God. They did not have eternal life in their mortal bodies.

This is one of Paul's flashback passages. He's talking to them now about their prior condition. As we saw in John 5:24 to 29, death is both spiritual and physical. Already, those who hear Jesus' words and believe in the one who sent him know that Jesus is so much the revealer of the Father.

If you hear Jesus' word and believe, you believe in the Father. Jesus says they move from death to life. They're spiritually raised now, but it'll wait. It awaits the last day when, at the voice of the son of man, those who in their graves will come out those who have done good to a resurrection of life, those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment.

Death and the fear of death are the result of sin. Death is both spiritual and physical. A nice logical step is to talk about the intermediate state.

Scripture teaches three states. The present state of life in the body, the intermediate or interim state, when we are unnaturally separated from our bodies, and the eternal state or final state. Present state, intermediate state, final state.

Present state, interim state, eternal state. Like that. We want to talk about the present state, the intermediate state, that is, for believers and for unbelievers.

Concerning the latter, Scripture says very little. I count one, maybe two passages. When the Bible talks about hell, it's almost always the final state for the lost.

But let's start with happier teachings, and that is the present state, the intermediate state, I mean, of believers. Luke 23:43. Ah, yes.

It's an unusual place for evangelism, but... On the cross, Jesus leads one of his fellow people on the cross and another cross to faith. Luke 23, 39. One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us.

But the other man rebuked him, saying, Do you not fear God since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.

That would be the final stage of the kingdom. The kingdom was fulfilled in its fullness. And he said to him, Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Some try to get around this by quoting Psalm 90 and then 2 Peter 3. Oh, a day with the Lord is like a thousand years. No, that's not what's going on, as Howard Marshall shows in his Luke commentary. No, Jesus is talking about this day. While their bodies remained on the crosses, their immaterial part will go to be with the Lord.

Now here, paradise. Another intertestamental way, and this time talking about word, talking about bliss. Intermediate heaven.

Today, you will be with me in paradise. Doesn't the Bible talk about our souls going to be with the Lord? Sometimes. Our spirits? Yes.

But usually, it simply uses personal pronouns. Here, you will be with me today in intermediate heaven. Believers experience intermediate heaven.

Revelation 6-9 is one place that uses the word soul in this regard. When he opened the fifth seal, that is, the lamb, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out for vengeance.

It is not the time of the resurrection yet. It's the intermediate state, and John sees the souls. He was unable to see the immaterial parts of martyrs, believers who had died for the Lord.

That uses the word souls. Hebrews 12:23 uses the word spirits to refer to the same reality. Comparing the Old and New Testaments, the Sinai experience, and the giving of the law with the new covenant.

You've come to Mount Zion, verse 22, to the city of the living God, to heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. You come to the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Revelation 6-9, souls.

Hebrews 12:23, spirits. But yet, so souls and spirits are used of this. We have bodies and material parts.

We have immaterial parts, sometimes called the soul, sometimes called the spirit. Do I think we can distinguish those sometimes in Scripture? Yes. Do I think they are different parts of our makeup? No.

I don't think you can show that. And even if you could, the Bible doesn't do anything with it, so we should be careful in that regard. I'll tell you what the normal state of affairs, however, is that body and soul are together.

That's how Adam and Eve were made. That's how we are now. And that is how we will be forever.

The disembodied spiritual existence in the intermediate state is, from the perspective of the Bible's story and theological anthropology, abnormal and temporary. It is not normal to be out of your body. But it exists.

And according to Philippians 1:23, it is better than being alive in the body in some sense or senses. What is that talking about? Paul is contemplating. He's in prison.

He's contemplating whether he'll go to be with the Lord or whether he'll be released and keep on serving the Lord. I don't know which to choose, he says. They both have advantages.

I'm hard-pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Convinced of this, I know I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again. To be absent from the body, sorry, to depart the body, this life, and be with Christ, he calls far better. I want you to remember back to junior high school now.

Degrees of adjectives. Positive, that's the one we forget. Comparative, superlative.

Good, better, best. If it's better to be with the Lord in the intermediate state, then it's good now to know the Lord in our bodies. To have eternal life in mortal bodies, Romans 8. It is better than the alternative, not having eternal life in mortal bodies, being lost.

But to depart and be with Christ is better by far, Paul says. How could that be? How could it be better to be abnormally separated from your body? That's a good question. Two answers.

According to Hebrews 12:23, to come to the spiritual Mount Zion, to come to the heaven, intermediate heaven is to come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect. In the intermediate state, sin will be a thing of the past. We'll be without our bodies.

But can you imagine never thinking of another sinful thought? Never say another sinful word. Never commit another sinful action. I'll be honest, I can't.

But a long time ago, I decided my imagination is not my canon. The Bible's my canon. I can't imagine the beginning or the end really well.

That's okay. That's all right. I believe the Bible against my imagination or in spite of my lack of the same.

Notice how personal pronouns are again used for the intermediate state. Luke 23, today you will be with me in paradise. Here, I desire to depart and be with Christ because that's much better than even being alive now and living for Christ, knowing Christ.

The use of pronouns even more commonly than the words soul or spirit for the intermediate blessed existence speaks of the continuity of personality, of personhood. We can exist without our bodies. It is unusual.

It is temporary. But we can. Those who believe in mortalism, that when you die, that's the end of you.

Some Christians hold to that, and then they hold to a resurrection from the body at the end, the resurrection of the body at the end. I think they have a problem with continuity of personhood. But the intermediate existence, whereby the same personal pronouns are used of people without their bodies tends toward a continuity of personality and our being persons, a continuity of personhood.

Perhaps the greatest passage on the intermediate state of believers is 2 Corinthians 5. I haven't solved all the problems in this passage, and there are debates about what's going on, but this is really plain to me. So, 2 Corinthians 5:6 So we are always

of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body, personal pronouns again, we are away from the Lord.

For we walk by faith, not by sight. We cannot see the Lord. Twice 1 Peter 1 says that.

We can't see Jesus now. Yes, we're of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. This seems to be a clear teaching of the continued existence of human beings without their bodies in an intermediate or interim existence.

So, whether we're at home or away we make it our aim to please Him. 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. Scripture teaches the intermediate state for believers.

I want to be clear. It teaches it. It makes its presence felt, I hope, at Christian funerals done by believing pastors, but it is not the main Christian hope.

We confess this reality. We are sad at funerals, and yet we're bittersweet at funerals because our departed brother or sister is with the Lord. They're without sin and they're with the Lord in all these passage after passage.

Luke 23, you'll be with me in paradise. Philippians 1 I want to depart and be with Christ. Far better.

2 Corinthians 5:8 to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. It is Christ's presence. The immediate presence of Christ in glory makes the intermediate state better by far than the present one.

But it is not the best. Remember that junior high stuff again. Good.

Better. Best. The best is to be reunited with one's body.

To be resurrected from the dead. To be totally sanctified. Outwardly adopted by God with the biggest hug you ever saw.

And on and on. Justified before men and angels. Anyway, you can conceive of salvation.

Called by Jesus, Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the creation of the world. Matthew 25.

Sheep and the goats. Maybe it's verse 34—something like that.

That's the best. This is not the best. Even the intermediate state is not the best.

So, I want to put this intermediate state business in the bigger context of the resurrection of the body. What about the intermediate state for unbelievers? If the Bible is a little lesson in theological method. If the Bible said nothing about it.

I would say the Bible says nothing about it. So, I'm going to carefully systematize and speculate based on what we do know. I would say, presumably, the immaterial part of unbelievers is separated from their bodies at death, and they go to an intermediate judgment.

An intermediate hell. We don't have to speculate. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus teaches this.

Luke 23. This is another passage that teaches the intermediate state of the righteous. As a matter of fact, it teaches the intermediate states of both the saved and the unsaved.

Notice that it's the intermediate state, not the final state. I've seen books written claiming this is the final state. That's wrong.

Oh, we can use some of these principles to understand the final state, but that's not right. Luke 16:19 and 31. It's not a parable because it uses a name.

I'm not sure where that principle came from, but it's wrong because this has parabolic features written all over it. Luke 16:19 19 Still can't get to Luke 16:19 to 31 There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

At his gate was laid a poor man named presumably couldn't even get there himself named Lazarus, not the brother of Mary and Martha. Just another person and the name may be significant. It means the one whom God helps cover with sores who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

That's not a good thing. These are not little French poodles or house dogs. These are wild animals.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, that is the Greek word, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham off, far off, and Lazarus at his side.

Excuse me. 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'm in anguish in this

flame. But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things.

But now he's comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed so that those who passed from here to you may not be able to. And none may cross from there to us.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment. But Abraham said. They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.

And the man said, No, Father Abraham. But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. 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.

It is a powerful passage. It is a parable. I don't know who said parables can't teach doctrine.

I don't know who made that up, but it's not true. We have to be careful. The church fathers terribly allegorized the parables.

A French, German, liberal New Testament scholar, Adolf Jülicher, made great advances in his books on the parables. But he didn't allegorize. But his principle that each parable has only one point is not biblical either.

It is possible some parables have only one point. But that is to be decided by the exegesis of the parables. They can have two or three or more points.

One good book on the parables. It says there's one major point for each parable, each figure, a major figure in the parable. In any case, here we have the intermediate state of both the saved and the lost.

We know that the rich man was unsaved. He wants, he is in fire. In hell passages, fire speaks of suffering and punishment.

I'm in torment in these flames, he says. And he wants Father Abraham, who's the God figure in the parable, to send someone from the dead to warn his brothers so that they won't come to that place of torment. Lazarus, by implication, is a believer.

His name means him whom God helps. And in this life, he had a terrible existence. But he died and went to Abraham's side.

Between the testaments, this is one way of viewing intermediate heaven. Abraham's bosom or Abraham's side. Being with Father Abraham meant being in bliss and being in heaven.

Rich man dies and ends up in Hades. This is the word Hades, Hades in the New Testament. Usually, it means the grave.

Here, it means intermediate hell. That's only decided by the context. Death and Hades, for example, go together in the book of Revelation.

It's an example of Hendiadys, literally one through two in Greek. That is, one concept with two expressions bound up with it. Death and Hades mean death and the grave in the book of Revelation.

Here, it is used for intermediate hell. And he's in torment. Why are you sure it's a parable? Because the parabolic features abound.

Abraham is not the master of hell. People in hell, master of heaven, I'm sorry, of the afterlife. People in hell aren't going to be able to talk to people in heaven.

And on and on it goes like that. It is a parable to teach certain truths. Namely, the main point, as a matter of fact, because of the principle of end stress, is that Scripture is sufficient to teach us about God and the matters of God.

And Moses and the prophets, of course, stand for the Old Testament. And to reject the word of God, you're lost. The Bible is sufficient.

Of course, even if someone would rise from the dead, business is ironic because when Luke wrote, Jesus had risen from the dead. And not all the Jews believe because of that. So here we have Lazarus, the man whom God helps, who is in the bosom of Abraham and is in an intermediate heaven.

And here we have the lost, callous, rich man who took no thought of Lazarus, whose world was utterly separated from him. His gate cut the man out. Lazarus would have loved to have taken the pieces of bread that were used as napkins and thrown them on the floor for the dogs.

He would have loved to have had some of those. He had nothing to eat, but he was totally forgotten. He was nobody.

Worse than being marginalized by the rich man. The rich man is in torment. He's in fire.

And there's a great chasm between them. Now, there's not just a gate. Now, there's a chasm between heaven and hell.

Another feature is the parabolic feature, which is contrary to many evangelicals. I grieve at this. Teaching a chance after death for salvation.

It is not true. There's a chasm between heaven and hell. One cannot go from one place to the other.

Here's another place that teaches the intermediate state of the righteous. And the best place that I have found to teach the intermediate state of the unrighteous.

Another one, and I think it does, is 2 Peter 2:9. We will close with this and move on to the topic of immortality, immortality, not immorality, and good grief in our next lecture. Second Timothy. 2 Peter 2:9. The Lord is condemning false prophets.

Verse four: if the Lord did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment. If he did not spare the ancient world but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly. And if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, he condemned them to extinction, making them ungodly, an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.

And if he rescued the righteous lot. Then, in verse nine, the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority, is talking about the false prophets and their own lives and the results of their, dare I call them ministries. Lord knows how to rescue his people.

And he knows how verse nine is to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment. Day of judgment. The dictionary says it is of the last judgment and lists this place.

Second Peter two nine. New American Standard Bible to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment. And I've been to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment while continuing their punishment.

And I read from the ESV. I'm not, as it's not as clear in my mind, but I do believe it's a second passage that teaches that when unbelievers die, their immaterial parts don't get to be with the Lord. They go to an intermediate hell, and they suffer the punishment of God, awaiting the resurrection of the body and their consignment to eternal condemnation.

Thus begins our study of last things, and Lord willing, in our next lecture, we'll talk about matters beginning with immortality and then move on to Christ's second coming.

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