

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE INTERMEDIATE STATE OF THE DEAD

By Ashby L. Camp

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I. The Nature of Death

A. According to Scripture, physical death is the cessation of life in its familiar bodily state; it is not the end of existence. In other words, life and death are two different states of existence. Dying is a transition from one state to the other.

1. We are composed of two elements, a material component, the body, and an immaterial component, the soul or spirit.

a. Passages such as 1 Thess. 5:23 and Heb. 4:12 raise the question of whether the soul is separate from the spirit, but I am inclined to believe soul and spirit are synonyms for the same immaterial component of our being, perhaps emphasizing different aspects of that component or viewing it from different perspectives.

(1) As Jack Cottrell notes in *The Faith Once for All* (p. 142), "the Bible sometimes lists synonymous terms together to express completeness, without intending to imply that each term refers to a separate, distinct item."

(2) For example, when Jesus says in Mat. 22:37 that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, most understand that he is piling up roughly synonymous terms for the inner man to emphasize how completely we are to love God.

b. Favoring the two-element view is the fact Scripture uses "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably in a number of different contexts. For example:

(1) When Jesus was praying in the Garden prior to his arrest and crucifixion, he confessed, "My soul is troubled" (Jn. 12:27). When speaking of his coming betrayal by Judas, John says that Jesus "was troubled in his spirit" (Jn. 13:21).

(2) Mary's joyful response to the news of her impending conception included the refrain, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Lk. 1:46-47). Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy write in *Across the Spectrum* (p. 89): "Mary certainly was not referring to different parts of herself, one that magnified the Lord, the other that rejoiced in her Savior. All exegetes agree that this refrain is an example of Hebraic parallelism, in which the same thing is said in two different (parallel) ways. The fact 'spirit' and 'soul' can be paralleled in this way shows that they are synonymous."

c. Indeed, it seems, as Grudem says, that "Everything That the Soul Is Said to Do, the Spirit Is Also Said to Do, and Everything That the Spirit Is Said to Do the Soul Is Also Said to Do."

d. According to Millard Erickson (p. 521-522), the two-element (dichotomist) view probably is "the most widely held view through most of the history of Christian thought." For helpful discussions of the three-element view (Trichotomy) versus the two-element view (Dichotomy), see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 520-524; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 472-482; Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once For All* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002) 136-143.

2. Physical death or loss of life involves the separation of body and soul/spirit. James 2:26 states, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." See also Gen. 2:7 and 3:19 (implied), 35:18 (Rachel's soul departing at death); Eccles. 12:7 (spirit returns to God); Mat. 27:50 (Jesus gave up his spirit); Lk. 8:55 (restoration of Jairus's daughter to life described as her spirit returning); Acts 7:59 (Stephen prays for Jesus to receive his spirit); 2 Pet. 1:13-14 (Peter speaks of dying as the putting off of his tent).

3. Erickson gives the helpful analogy of a chemical compound. In a mixture, the atoms of each element retain their distinctive characteristics because they retain their separate identities. In other words, they change physically but don't combine chemically. In a compound, however, the atoms of the elements involved are combined to form molecules. These molecules are something different than the elements of which they are composed. For example, in the case of simple table salt, which is the compound sodium chloride, one cannot detect the qualities of either sodium or chlorine. We can think of a person as a unitary compound of a material and an immaterial element. This compound is dissolved at death, and at the resurrection, a compound will again be formed, with the soul becoming inseparably attached to a new kind of body. (Erickson, 537.)

B. In addition to physical death, which is the separation of soul/spirit from the body, Scripture speaks of spiritual death and eternal death. Spiritual death is the separation of the person from God (Lk. 9:60; Jn. 5:24; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 2:1-2; Col. 1:21). Eternal death is the finalizing of that state of separation – what Revelation calls the "second death" (Rev. 20:14, 21:8). Eternal death will not be experienced by the faithful (Rev. 20:6).

II. Between Death and Resurrection

A. It is a conscious existence

1. Death is portrayed as a conscious existence in Isa. 14:9-10,¹ Ezek. 32:21, 31, Lk. 16:19-31, and Rev. 6:9-11.

a. In Lk. 16:19-31, the godless rich man knows where he is, knows where Lazarus is, and knows that he has brothers back on earth. The "I" is still the "I" he was back on earth, and he still has memory. I agree that this probably is an example story (a subclass of parables), meaning that "[i]t teaches a lesson through comparison of a graphic hypothetical situation with true life. It depicts, not a single real event, but a representative one." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1365. The issue, however, is whether one can draw from this example story truths about one's state after death. I believe one can.

b. The main point of the story is to warn people of the danger of rejecting kingdom ethics (in this instance the ethic of concern for the needy), which is a rejection of God. If people are not conscious after death, I do not see how Jesus could indicate to his hearers that they would face irreversible, conscious torment if they rejected God's will during their lives. In that case, he would be warning them by means of a threat that was untrue.

c. I suppose one could argue that the portrayal of conscious torment was hyperbole designed to dramatize the horror of unconscious existence, but that would require one to prove that a first-century Jew would understand it that way. That seems an impossible task, given that among the beliefs about the afterlife in first-century Judaism was the belief that the spirits of the ungodly were tormented and the spirits of the godly were blessed in the period between death and the day of judgment (see, e.g., 2 Esdras 7:75ff).

2. In addition, Jesus told the crucified thief (or rebel) in Lk. 23:43 that he would be with him that day in "paradise." This carries a connotation of pleasantness that seems inapplicable to an unconscious state. As Bock (1996) notes (p. 1858), Jesus' reply "suggests that the criminal will be in some conscious, intermediate state until the resurrection, though this conclusion is implied, rather than explicit."

3. The fact "sleep" is used as a metaphor for death does not mean the deceased's soul/spirit is unaware of existence. The imagery of sleep is based on the appearance of *the body* in death. A person who is dead resembles a person who is sleeping in that his body lies motionless, and as a sleeping person rises in the morning, so too the dead will rise in the resurrection. The metaphor says nothing about the state of the soul/spirit that has departed the body. For information about that, one must look to other Scriptures, and they indicate that death is a conscious existence.

¹ The inhabitants are referred to as "shades" or "weak ones" in that they are only a shadow or reflection of the full persons they were on earth.

B. There is a distinction in the conditions of existence

1. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk. 16:19-31 presupposes a distinction between the post-death conditions of the righteous and the wicked. The ungodly rich man is in misery and the godly poor man is in a state of blessing and comfort. Note that this distinction clearly is fixed. Verse 26 says a "great chasm" separates the two so there are no crossovers.

2. In Lk. 23:43 Jesus refers to the blessed, post-death state of the righteous as "paradise." He told the thief that the thief would be with him in paradise that day.

3. So death for the Christian is not viewed as an unpleasant prospect. Revelation 14:13 declares, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." In Phil. 1:21-23 Paul says that to him to live is Christ and *to die is gain* and that his desire is to depart and be with Christ, for *this is far better*.

C. Do Christians enter into heaven at death or into some other blessed realm?

1. Though it is clear that when Christians die they enter immediately into a blessed realm or state, there is some debate about whether they actually are in heaven at that point or simply in a pleasant region in *Hades* (the Greek term for the abode of the dead, what in Hebrew was called *Sheol*).

2. It seems to me that the paradise to which Jesus and the thief went upon death was not heaven but a region within *Hades*. I say that because *Jesus* apparently went to *Hades* upon his death, not to heaven. This is suggested by:

a. Acts 2:31 says David spoke prophetically of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not "abandoned to *Hades*, nor did His flesh suffer decay." I understand this to mean that, by the resurrection, Jesus was not *allowed to remain in Hades*, nor was his body left in the grave. See BDAG (2000) 273.

b. Rom. 10:6-7 refers to Christ being in "the abyss" in death, and in the LXX of Ps. 71:20 "abyss" refers to the depths of the earth as the abode of the dead, meaning *Sheol*. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:525.

c. God's dwelling is in heaven, but in Jn. 20:17 Jesus told Mary, after being dead, not to touch him because he had "not yet ascended to the Father."

d. Some believe 1 Pet. 3:18-20 (Jesus "made proclamation to the spirits now in prison") refers to Christ's time in *Hades*, but that is uncertain.

3. If the paradise to which Jesus and the thief went was indeed a region of *Hades*, then the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk. 16:19-31 should be understood as depicting the separate parts of *Hades*, not as depicting *Hades* and heaven.

Abraham and Lazarus are in "paradise," and the ungodly rich man is in the punitive part of *Hades*. (Many refer to the punitive part of *Hades* as "Tartarus." This is based on 2 Pet. 2:4, which says sinful angels have been cast into Tartarus.)

4. On the other hand, it appears that, since Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Christians go to heaven when they die.²

a. In Phil. 1:21-23, Paul says that to die "is gain" and that he longs "to depart and be with Christ" because that condition is "far better" than remaining in the body.

(1) Some claim that Paul does not mean here that he would be with Christ soon after his death only that he *eventually* would be with Christ after staying in paradise from the time of his death until the time of Christ's return. But Paul clearly connects his departing to his being "with Christ." He refers to the departure and the being with Christ as a single event. He writes, "I have the desire" (singular) and "for [this is] by much a better thing" (singular), and he has the two infinitives ("to depart" and "to be") share one article, thus binding them together. As Peter O'Brien notes in *The Epistle to the Philippians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 130:

The statement about Paul's death is bound in the closest possible way to what follows: the *kai* [and] joining the two infinitives (*analousai* and *einai*) is explicative: to have departed from this life is to have taken up residence in the presence of the Lord. This is why Paul presents it as being eminently desirable that he should die.

(2) If Paul's departure did nothing to hasten his being "with Christ" but simply put him in another place to wait to be with Christ, just like those who did not depart, there would be no basis for connecting the two.

b. In Acts 7:56-59 Stephen saw heaven being opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, and then, while being stoned to death, prayed for the Lord Jesus to "receive his spirit." The claim that Stephen did not think he would be with Jesus soon after his death, only that he would eventually be with him in the resurrection, stumbles on the fact he prayed for the Lord to receive his *spirit*, not his resurrected being. It does not help to appeal to Lk. 23:46 because there the dying Jesus *entrusted* himself to God's protection, whereas here Stephen asks that his spirit be *received*.

²For a contrary view, see Jack P. Lewis, *Exegesis of Difficult Passages* (Searcy, AR: Resource Publications, 1988) 175-198 (esp. 194-198) and Owen D. Olbricht, "Where Do the Dead Go?" 141 *Gospel Advocate* (February 1999) 36-38. No one denies that the spirits of departed Christians enter a blessed realm upon death. The question is whether that realm may be referred to properly as heaven.

c. In Rev. 6:9 the souls of Christian martyrs are pictured as being under the heavenly altar. It is true, of course, that Revelation is loaded with symbolism, but one must be careful not to miss the point of the symbolism. I believe the opening of the first five seals of the scroll correspond to the birthpangs of this age, the distress that ultimately gives way to the Judgment/Second Coming. The fifth seal suggests that Christian martyrdom will be a part of this age. The fact the souls of the martyrs are seen as being under the altar in God's heavenly temple is a way of saying that their untimely deaths are, from God's perspective, a sacrifice on the altar of heaven. The white robes they are given (6:11) represent blessedness (see 7:13-14) or perhaps victory (as in 6:2). The point is that, though they have yielded their lives for their faith, they are in a blessed state as they await the outworking of God's plan. It certainly seems that the blessed state includes the presence of God.

d. In Rev. 20:4-6, as I understand it, those who were faithful till death are depicted as reigning with Christ in heaven throughout the period of Satan's restricted power.

5. The foregoing suggests that Jesus' resurrection and ascension removed the barrier between heaven and "paradise" so that the righteous now enjoy a heavenly level of communion with the Lord immediately upon death. That fits nicely with the fact Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 connects "paradise" to heaven.³

6. Some objections to the claim Christians enter into heaven at death

a. Objection: The fact David did not ascend into the heavens (Acts 2:34) means the righteous dead must still be in *Hades* rather than heaven.

b. Response: I believe this verse is referring only to the fact David had not ascended *bodily* to heaven. As Peter explained in v. 29, David, unlike Jesus, was still in his tomb. It was Jesus, not David, who had been raised from the dead. The argument is that, since David had not been resurrected and therefore did not ascend to heaven (that is, in a resurrected, fully alive state), the words spoken by God to David (from Ps. 110:1, quoted in vv. 34b-35) must have referred to Jesus rather than to David. Jesus is the one who has been made Lord of all. To say that David's *spirit* could not have been taken to heaven after Jesus' resurrection and ascension is to go beyond Peter's intention. He simply was not addressing that question.

c. Objection: Jesus will raise on the last day those who accept Him (John 6:40, 44, 54). Jesus will judge on the last day those who do not accept him (John 12:48). If they are already in heaven and judged when they die, then why raise them up and judge them on the last day?

³"Paradise" in 2 Cor. 12:4 is the same word used in Lk. 23:43 to describe the blessed, post-death state to which Jesus and the thief were going. The only other time this word appears in the Greek N.T. is in Rev. 2:7 which speaks of the tree of life "in the paradise of God."

d. Response: The spirits of deceased saints are in heaven, but their natural bodies are in the grave. This separation of body and spirit is the definition of death. On the last day, the *whole person* will be raised from the dead, meaning his or her spirit/soul will be reunited with a body that has been "supernaturalized," that is, a body that has been made immortal, glorious, powerful, and imperishable. The heaven that deceased saints now experience as disembodied spirits will on the last day be experienced by them as resurrected beings.

(1) So why raise them up? That they may live again as whole persons rather than as disembodied spirits and may enjoy forever the presence of God in that fully alive state. That is the resurrection hope. The final judgment relates to the eternal destiny of resurrected persons.

(2) The fact there has been an interim judgment of the dead by which their spirits were assigned to different locations (heaven or the sorrowful realm of *Hades*) does not negate the idea of a final judgment at the Second Coming. Indeed, those who believe the spirits of the faithful dead are assigned to the joyful realm of *Hades* (Paradise) rather than to heaven accept that an interim judgment of the dead occurs. They just disagree as to the location of its subjects.

e. Objection: Christ was the first to be raised, then those who are his will be raised at his coming (1 Cor. 15:22-24). We will not be changed from being physical to being spiritual (1 Cor. 15:44) until the trumpet sounds (1 Cor. 15:51-54). The physical cannot enter heaven (1 Cor. 15:50). The dead will not be changed into the spiritual until the resurrection; therefore, they must not be in heaven.

f. Response: The argument here is: (1) the spirits of deceased saints are *physical* until the Second Coming, (2) physical things cannot enter heaven, and therefore (3) the spirits of deceased saints cannot enter heaven until they are made *spiritual* at the Second Coming. I disagree with everything about this.

(1) First, spirits are nonphysical by nature.

(a) The fact God the Father is spirit (Jn. 4:24) means, among other things, that he is nonphysical. Notice how "spirit" is contrasted with "flesh" in Isa. 31:3. A "physical spirit" is an oxymoron.

(b) As noted above, humans are composed of a physical element (body) and a nonphysical element (spirit/soul). Physical death or loss of life involves the separation of physical body and the nonphysical spirit/soul.

(c) Paul in no way says in 1 Cor. 15:44 that "spirits" are physical. He is speaking about the nature of the resurrection *body* and says (1 Cor. 15:42-44):

⁴² So also is the resurrection of the dead. ⁴³ It is sown in a perishable state; it is raised in an imperishable state. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

The *body* that dies, that is sown in the ground, is a *natural* body (he does not describe it as a *physical* body), meaning one subject to decay and death; the *body* that is raised is a "spiritual *body*," meaning a "supernatural" body that is no longer subject to death and decay. Paul does not say the dead body is raised "a spirit" but "a spiritual *body*," with "spiritual" being used in contrast to "natural."

(2) Second, I disagree with the claim that 1 Cor. 15:50 bars all things physical from entering heaven. Paul there says, "Now I say this, brothers, that flesh and blood is not able to inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." He is referring to flesh and blood *as presently constituted*, that is, as subject to weakness, decay, and death. He was not saying that a natural body that was miraculously transformed into a supernatural ("spiritual") body (being imperishable, glorious, powerful, and immortal) could not, in some sense, be said to consist of flesh and bones.

(3) Finally, having disagreed with both premises of the argument, I naturally reject the conclusion. There is no bar to the spirits of deceased saints entering heaven, and the texts I cite above convince me that is precisely where they go.

g. Objection: The dead "in Christ" do not rise until the return of Jesus and the sound of the last trumpet (1 Thess. 4:15, 16). It is then they will be raised to meet the Lord in the air. Paul is not writing to Christians who have been Christians very long, so this could not possibly refer to loved ones "in Christ" who lived before Jesus left Hades.

h. Response: The "rising" of which Paul speaks in these verses is the rising of deceased saints from the grave with resurrection bodies. Just as Jesus "died and rose again" (v. 14), so Christians who have died before his return will "rise" at his return. The spirits of deceased saints go to be with the Lord, and when he returns, those spirits are united with bodies that have been "supernaturalized." The whole, unified being rises from the grave. Paul is not saying anything about the location of the spirits of deceased saints prior to the resurrection.

D. The resurrection judgment – However much better it may be than life here (because of enhanced communion with God), life in a disembodied state will not compare to the glory of our resurrection life.