

BEYOND THE DOOR OF DEATH

What awaits a dying saint on the other side of the door of death?

Let us begin the answer with this preliminary observation. Every person's total lifespan consists of the following three stages. Stage 1-this present life, beginning with conception and ending with death. Stage 2-the intermediate state, the interval between death and the future bodily resurrection. Stage 3-the eternal state, beginning with the resurrection at the return of Christ and reaching on into an endless eternity. We need this frame of reference in order to think correctly about what lies beyond death.

In an effort to comfort a bereaved family, someone may remark, "Your loved one is now walking the streets of gold." Such a remark, although it may be said with the best intention, is misleading. When a saint dies, he does not go directly from Stage 1 into Stage 3. In fact, that third stage, the heaven of the far-off hereafter, lies on the other side of the yet- to-occur, end-time bodily resurrection. The saint's entrance into that third stage must, therefore, wait until he has received a new body.

In conjunction with that transition, there will be another transition. This present physical order will be replaced by *new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness* (2Pe 3:13) and wherein will be the New Jerusalem. Revelation 21:1 begins with John saying, *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.*

Instead of going directly from Stage 1 into Stage 3 when a person dies, the part of him that survives is ushered into what theologians call "the intermediate state." That is likewise the title of Article 17 in our Confession of Faith. It is called that because, during that stage of his existence, the departed person is in a disembodied condition. Body # 1 has been left behind, and body #2 has not yet been supplied. And I would emphasize this detail: that label, the intermediate state, refers not to a place but to the out-of-the-body condition in which a departed person finds himself.

Obviously, those in that condition are somewhere, and (thankfully) Jesus supplied us with that detail. He told the dying, penitent thief, *today shalt thou be with me in paradise* (Luke 23:43). While the body of Jesus was in the tomb; evidently His spirit and the spirit of that penitent thief were together, along with many other like-minded spirits, in the place that Jesus called Paradise. Of course, unlike those other spirits, the spirit of Jesus was quickly reunited with His newly resurrected body. The opposite of Paradise is called Hades. That is for the spirits of those who die without Christ.

We have now learned that despite their less-than-normal condition, departed saints are in Paradise. Therefore, we are justified in saying that departing saints go to heaven. But

it is the heaven of the near-hereafter in contrast to the heaven of the far-hereafter. Further, I do not hesitate to also call it the heaven of the intermediate state.

The rest of this article will focus on the intermediate state, since that is what lies just on the other side of "the door of death." The framework for this treatise consists of a series of Bible-derived observations,

1. God has revealed relatively little about this stage of our existence.

In the following passage, Paul alluded to a man who had an unusual experience. It is widely believed that Paul was alluding to an experience of his own.

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter (2Co 12:2-4).

Evidently, Paul had gotten inside the door of Paradise. But he was not allowed to elaborate on that experience. Why? We are not told. We simply do not know.

Some people, on the basis of Hebrews 12:1, suspect that, as we run the race of life, we are being observed by the departed saints. However, that is a poorly supported supposition. Already in the Old Testament era, any attempt to communicate with departed saints was strictly forbidden.

2. The people who now exist in that in-between state far outnumber all other populations.

Generation after generation adds its total number of dying persons to the population of that intermediate world. Irrespective of believer or unbeliever, and irrespective of age, that unseen world is where all the dying go. Probably, we would be surprised if we knew how many go there while still in their babyhood, and we wonder what they will be like when they arrive in Stage 3-the eternal state.

3. The intermediate state is temporary.

That fact is highlighted in the following passage.

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life (2Co 5:1-4).

Although it is very informative, this passage is somewhat difficult to understand because two figures of speech are mixed together. First, the body is likened to a house: the temporary mortal house in which you now live and the permanent immortal house you will receive in the Resurrection. Secondly, your present body is likened to a

garment that covers your inner person. When you die, the garment of your body is removed, leaving you in a condition that is "naked" or "unclothed." Obviously, Paul did not want to remain in that temporary, out-of-the-body condition.

4. When a person moves from this life into the intermediate state, two kinds of separation occur.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 says that upon one's death, "the dust" (from which our bodies were made) *shall return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.* This is the first separation: the spirit of the dying person is separated from his body. And then, upon the spirit's return to God, there is a second separation. Some of those returning spirits are sent by God to one locality, and some to another. This second separation marks the beginning of a permanent separation; never will spirit and body be together again, although they both will be present at the Judgment.

5. During that second stage of existence, both believers and unbelievers are alike in this one respect: they are both in a disembodied condition.

But there is a vast difference in what they experience while in that in-between condition! From Jesus, we have learned about a once rich man who, after he died, lifted up his eyes in hell. Which hell? Gehenna, the lake of fire? No. In this instance, the English word hell is translated from the Greek word Hades. Hades is the New Testament name for the hell of the near-hereafter. However, we learn from passages like Revelation 20:14 that on the other side of the Judgment, the occupants of Hades will be cast into the still-worse hell of the far-hereafter: Gehenna, the lake of fire. In our King James Bible, this word Gehenna is also translated hell.

And what about Lazarus? He was being comforted in Abraham's bosom. Already in the near-hereafter, the inequalities that had existed in life were reversed. The rich man was told, *Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented* (Luke 16:25).

Jesus wants us to know what awaits us just on the other side of the door of death.

6. The apostle John, while writing the Book of Revelation, was equipped by God to see the souls of departed saints.

For example, Revelation 6:9 quotes John as saying, *I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.*

Likewise, in Revelation 20:4, John said, *I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus.* The very next verse, Revelation 20:5, says, *the rest of the dead.*

That is our clue that the after-death experience of two contrasting groups of people is in focus. And although he mentioned the rest of the dead, he was not seeing them, for they were not in Paradise but in Hades.

7. Thus, contrary to the widely taught "soul-sleeping theory," departed souls are not in a long, deep sleep during the interval between their death and their resurrection.

Admittedly, death is likened to a sleep in numerous Bible passages. However, careful Bible interpreters agree that all such passages refer to the body only. Nowhere do the Scriptures say that the soul of the departed one falls asleep. Notice again this passage:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth (Rev 6:9-10)?

Very obviously, these departed souls were fully conscious and wide awake. In fact, according to Revelation 20, they were so awake that they were reigning with Christ. Earlier, in Revelation 3, Jesus had promised, *To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne*, meaning His present, mediatory throne. In my opinion, what John was seeing was the fulfillment of that promise. And it is also obvious that the soul of the rich man in Luke 16 was not asleep. That soul-sleeping theory is all wrong.

8. In spite of the abnormal character of the intermediate state, for the saint, it is a big improvement over the here and now.

The apostle Paul wrote, *We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord (2Co 5:8).*

Paul did not at all dread the prospect of being absent from the body. He understood that any lack associated with being absent from the body would be more than compensated for by being in our Lord's immediate presence. He viewed the intermediate state as an improvement. Notice the following passage:

According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you (Php 1:20-24).

Did you notice those comparatives? To die is what? Gain. To depart and to be with Christ is what? Far better than the here and now!

9. The opportunity to choose one's destiny terminates when he crosses the threshold into the intermediate world.

When once the eyes close in death, one's destiny is forever sealed. Every minute of every hour of every day, numbers of people are leaving behind their last opportunity to change their hell-bound course of travel. Although that is tragic, is our doing so little to warn them any less tragic?

10. According to this writer's understanding of the Bible, the return of Christ will set in motion the biggest evacuation operation that will ever occur.

Those billions upon billions of people, who are now in Stage 2 of their existence, will be moved by God out of that stage into the third and final stage of their existence. In that process, those disembodied souls will have acquired, through their resurrection, their second and final bodies. That development will take those who died as unbelievers out of Hades, the hell of the near-hereafter, into Gehenna, the lake of fire.

In contrast, that same development will take those who died in Christ out of Paradise, the heaven of the near-hereafter, into the New Jerusalem, located on "the new earth."

Now, did I miss anything? Yes, I did. Following the resurrection, there will be the final Judgment. Then those whom Christ turns to the left will go into everlasting punishment, and those whom He turns to the right will go into life eternal (Matthew 25:31-46).

And now, I need to call your attention to an exception. Unlike any former generation, those still living when Christ returns will move directly from Stage 1 into Stage 3 without ever existing in that in-between condition. Those saints still living will be instantly transformed and will be caught up together with their resurrected loved ones who died in Christ, to meet the Lord in the air. And so shall they be forever with the Lord (1Co 15:51-52; 1Th 4:15-17).

And so, when the saints die, let us continue to say, "They go to heaven"; but let us do so with the awareness that the heaven they go to is the heaven of the near-hereafter. Nevertheless, what they experience already in that realm is far better than the here and now.

This completes our journey "beyond the door of death." For every detail, we were wholly dependent upon what God has so graciously revealed in His written Word.

God does not want His people to fear what is in store for them on the other side of the door of death. That is obvious because John heard a voice from heaven, saying unto him, *Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them* (Rev 14:13).

Oh, what comforting words! Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord!

~Merle Ruth

Originally published in the Christian Contender

Christian Contender Editor's note:

The author of this article has since passed into that state of which he wrote. Concerning the intermediate state, our perceptions are indeed limited and are therefore subject to varied opinions. However, let us consider the Scriptures cited here and, above all, prepare our hearts for eternity. We know that the Lord will take care of His own.