

What happens when we die?

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[0 : 00] Well, do make sure that the Bible is open in front of you. Like last week, we're going to look at a few references across the Bible, but we will mainly be in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 this morning.

But there will be a part of the sermon where we will probably do a bit of flipping, or it will be on the screen as well that will help you along. If you've got a sermon outline in front of you, that will also help you to follow along. But do make sure that at least 2 Corinthians chapter 5 is open in front of you.

Let me pray one more time. Heavenly Father, we thank you again. And I just pray, Lord, that as your word is about to be proclaimed, I just ask, Lord, that you help me to be clear, help me to be faithful.

And would you use these words, Lord, to strengthen the faith of your people? Would you help them to be able to have more confidence in you and your goodness? All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, last week we started our series on the afterlife by asking this question, is death the end? And we said yes and no.

[1 : 03] Yes, because for every human being, death is the end point of this present life. There's no escaping it. It's the point where the referee blows his whistle and says the match is over, the scoreline is final.

But we also said no, because death is not the end of your existence. After death comes judgment. And so what we did last week was to fast forward to the end of time when Jesus returns and the new creation is coming into being and to look at the day of judgment.

Now, if you missed it, the sermon is available on our website for you to catch up. But what we haven't discussed yet is what happens between the moment you experience physical death and the day when we stand before the great white throne.

And that's what we're going to be looking at over these two weeks. And this week we're going to look at what theologians call the intermediate state. Now, it's not a phrase found in the Bible.

So, that's not a problem in itself since words like trinity and missionary are also, strictly speaking, not found in the Bible either.

[2 : 17] What matters is the idea or the concept. And so we're going to explore what the Bible says about the state of the human person after physical death but before the final resurrection.

That's what we mean by the intermediate state. But we're going to start just a little further back. We're going to begin today by asking a question that you might have asked yourself at some point. Why do Christians still die? Now, we know why death exists. Paul sums it up well. The wages of sin is death, Romans 6.23.

In other words, death is the punishment for sin. When Adam and Eve disregarded God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, well, they had to suffer the consequences. They didn't believe that God would be true to his word. But God is a truth teller. And so when he says eating that fruit will lead to death, he means it.

[3 : 28] And so we died spiritually as we are condemned and separated from God. And we die physically as well as a result as our bodies decay away.

But wait a minute, you say, if we're Christians, we know death no longer has the last word. We know Jesus came to take the penalty for our sin.

He died to kill death. His gospel is the word of life. As 2 Timothy 1.9-10 puts it, But if so, then why do Christians still die?

Has not Christ paid the full penalty for their sin? Well, the short answer, Christians still die in this life because Christians still live as part of the old creation, which labours under the curse of sin.

It hasn't yet been removed. And so we still live for the moment under the presence, under the shadow of death, having to reckon with its presence.

[4 : 51] But here is the difference Jesus makes. Christians still die. But the meaning of their death has changed.

The Heidelberg Catechism, which we have sometimes been reciting this year, puts it very well. In question 42, they ask this very question. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die? Answer? Our death does not pay the debt of our sins. Rather, it puts an end to our sinning and is our entrance into life.

In other words, death is no longer something to be feared, but something we can, on one level at least, look forward to. Death is no longer the ultimate punishment, but a release from this present evil age.

Death is no longer a termination, but a transition to something better. And I begin here because that's also the perspective of the passage that Charles has just read for us this morning.

[6 : 09] Our advertised question for today is, what happens when Christians die? And like I said, we will explore the question of this, of the intermediate state.

But before we get into specifics, I want first of all to give the big picture answer to this question. And this is the big picture answer.

When a Christian dies, they are transitioning to something better. When a Christian dies, they are transitioning to something better.

And that is the underlying tone of the first eight verses of 2 Corinthians 5. That is the mood, the vibe, the atmosphere that Paul wants you to feel as you read these words.

When a Christian dies, they are transitioning to something better. Now, as I've discovered this week, this passage can actually be quite tricky.

[7 : 15] It's not easy to understand all the details. One reason for that is because Paul keeps switching metaphors as he speaks. One moment he's talking about dwellings.

The next moment he's talking about clothing. But to help you navigate the big picture, I want you to just keep these three images in mind. Paul says, when a Christian dies, it's like these three things. It's like moving into a superior house, changing into proper clothes, and going home. Now, for the moment, I am not going to explain what each of those things represent.

So I won't explain what the house or the clothing represents just yet. What I want you to concentrate on for now is simply that each image shows us a transition to something better.

So firstly, for the Christian, dying is like moving into a superior house. 5 verse 1.

[8 : 25] Now, I don't really know that much about tents.

I think I've only lived in a tent once in my life, as far as I can recall. But from what I understand, tents don't last forever. They certainly don't last as long as a house.

As they get exposed to the thunderstorms and the blistering UV rays from the sun, as mold gets inside them and the waterproof coating washes away, the tent will eventually break down.

Houses, on the other hand, can last much longer. I used to live in Oxford, and sometimes it seems like every house there is at least a thousand years old.

And this house that Paul describes in verse 1 is even better than those Grand Oxford houses. Notice how it's described.

[9 : 37] Its origin is heavenly. Its underlying structure is eternal. And it is built by God himself, not by human hands.

Now, my brother is currently waiting to move houses. And when we move, it can be both an unsettling yet exciting experience, can't it?

Especially if we anticipate moving to a place that's better. And when a Christian dies, yes, of course it's unsettling. We don't deny that, because sometimes we just can't see what lies ahead.

But Paul tells us there's also excitement ahead, because a Christian is moving from a tent that's slowly eroding to a heavenly house. It's a transition to something better.

And then he abruptly changes to his second image. Secondly, death, dying, is like changing into proper clothes. Now, I know reading verses 2 to 4 can be a bit confusing, because Paul mixes metaphors here.

[10 : 49] But just think of it a little bit like this for now. This is what Paul is saying. Right now, Paul knows that his current set of clothes isn't very good.

They certainly don't offer him good protection if it gets too cold. And so Paul has a longing. Now, he doesn't long, of course, to be unclothed. Rather, he longs for the day when he can put on an extra set of clothes.

That's a loose paraphrase of these verses. And the implication here is that when a Christian dies, it's like finding yourself moving from wearing clothes that are too thin to clothes that are just right. Now, I'm a person who is quite scared of the cold. So when I was in the UK, once summer was over, I became quite famous in my church for always wearing this particular hoodie and jacket over my shirt all the time.

My pastor used to tease me for trying to start a fashion trend. But to me, all those extra layers were warm and proper. And that's how a Christian's wardrobe, metaphorically speaking, will be like when they die.

[12:08] They will wear clothes that are warm and proper. It's a transition to something better. And then thirdly, dying is like going home.

That's in verses 6 to 8. We'll come back to look at these verses a little bit more closely. But for now, hopefully the picture itself is pretty straightforward.

When a Christian dies, he is at home with the Lord. Verse 8. And Paul concentrates on the who rather than the where.

For many of us know instinctively that it's actually the people. More than the place that makes a home a home.

Isn't it? Since I've been talking about my UK days a lot, let me just draw one more illustration from there. I lived in London for two years. I rented a room in a flat.

[13:13] And every day when I go back to that room, I am in a sense going home. But it's not really home, is it? There's no one there.

No home-cooked food from mum. None of my childhood nanya books to get lost in. But here in Kuching, when I go home, I go home to my wife and two kids, to actual food, to a shared space of laughter and relationship.

And so when a Christian dies, they are going home to the person who loves them most and who will provide the most intimate relational space for them.

It is a transition to something better. I've belabored the point a little bit, but I wanted to make it crystal clear that for the Christian, what happens when we die is an entirely, completely, totally different experience compared to someone who doesn't trust in Christ.

It is actually a sacred moment, a blessed moment. And if you don't understand anything else from today's sermon, but you understand this, if you recognize that in Christ, death has become a pathway to something better, and you find joy in that, I'll be satisfied.

[14:51] that will be more than enough. But now let's go back to 2 Corinthians 5, and this time we'll look at it from a slightly different angle.

We'll think about what this passage teaches us about our different stages of existence. And to do that, let me now explain what some of the images mean.

Firstly, the earthly tent in verse 1 refers to our current bodies. No one disputes that it's a broken down tent.

The house or the building from God is a little more disputed, but given the context, it is best to take it to mean our glorified resurrection body.

And so the way the message paraphrases verse 1 on the screen is correct. Paul is saying that we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven.

[16:04] God-made, not hand-made. Similarly, in verses 2 and 4, when Paul talks about longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.

Now, that's a strange phrase, isn't it? What he means is that he longs to put on his future resurrection body. And so from these verses, Paul envisions two stages of human existence. Our present embodied existence with our current bodies that are breaking down and a future embodied existence with bodies that will never break down.

But there's an issue. You might remember from last week that the bodily resurrection of the dead happens only when Jesus returns.

And so what happens if we die but Jesus hasn't returned? Are we just sleeping in the meantime? Or maybe we cease to exist temporarily but God stitches our molecules back in time on that final day?

[17:18] Well, Paul gives us hints of an answer in verses 6 to 8. So let me take you through those three verses. In verse 6, Paul says, we know that as long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord.

Now, what he means is this, as long as we are still here in our current bodies, living in this present world, we don't get to enjoy direct face-to-face relationship with God.

Now, he is not saying that we don't have any relationship with God right now, but he is saying that compared with what lies ahead, our relationship with God right now is like meeting someone on Zoom with their video off.

It is not like spending time with that same person directly in front of you. And so that's why he says, verse 7, we live by faith and not by sight.

Because right now, we can't see God, so it feels like we are away from him. But then, verse 8, he states his preference.

[18:37] He says that he would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. In other words, he appears to be saying this, I would rather die physically now and go to meet with God in a way that I cannot while I am still alive here.

I would rather die physically now and go to meet with God in person than on Zoom. And so what these verses do is they give us a big clue.

It suggests a third stage of human existence, the intermediate state. In this state, when we die, we appear to become disembodied.

That's why Paul says we are away from the body. We still exist, but to use the language of verse 3, it's like we are naked, because we don't wear the new clothes of our future resurrection body yet.

But this disembodied state, Paul says, is still better than before. For we no longer live by faith, but by sight.

[19:56] we will enjoy a deeper, sweeter fellowship with Christ than we ever did before. So in summary, this is what Paul is saying.

When a Christian dies, he or she gets to be in Jesus' presence straight away. They won't have their resurrection bodies for now.

They are away from the body, but they get to enjoy sweeter fellowship with Jesus. Now, take a moment to think about that.

What comfort, isn't it? Now, Paul doesn't go on to describe the intermediate state in further detail in our passage today.

And actually, the Bible overall is quite restrained in what it tells us about the intermediate state. The Bible takes more interest in things like the second coming of Jesus and our resurrection bodies, rather than in this particular stage of existence.

[21:04] And so, I'll try not to say more than what the Bible says and needlessly speculate, although there are some tantalizing and puzzling details here and there. And what I've also discovered this week is that it can be very challenging to try to bring together all that the Bible has to say about this in a neat way.

But what I'll do for this morning is I'll just try to keep things simple. But just in case you were wondering if 2 Corinthians 5 verse 8 is all we have to support this idea of the intermediate state, the answer is not quite.

And so let me just take you on a couple of other stops elsewhere in the Bible. We will briefly glance at the Old Testament and then we'll head to Luke's Gospel to see where else this idea of the intermediate state finds support.

So let's have a quick look at the Old Testament first. As we know, ever since Genesis 3, people die. And it is a tragedy. But is death the end? Is that what the Old Testament people thought? No, there are hints, especially in the Psalms, which express some sort of confidence of life beyond the grave, and which express confidence of a continuing relationship with God even after death.

[22:38] Now let me take Psalm 49 verses 13 to 15 as just one example. I've put a few other examples of the other Psalms on your handout. But Psalm 49 is what we'll look at.

Verse 13, this is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers who approve their sayings. They are like sheep and are destined to die.

Death will be their shepherd, but the upright will prevail over them in the morning. Their forms will decay in the grave. far from their princely mansions, but God will redeem me from the realm of the dead.

He will surely take me to himself. Well, that's relational language, isn't it? The Psalm is contrasting the unrighteous with himself, and he is confident that even in death, well, God will take him to be with him.

similarly, in Ecclesiastes chapter 12 verse 7, which we read earlier this morning, we read this, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

[23 : 54] And so although it's scattered in places, the Old Testament clearly has the expectation that there is some sort of existence after physical death.

The Ecclesiastes 12 reference hints at an initial disembodied existence. It's our spirit that initially goes to God.

But of course, that's not the end point. Isaiah chapter 26 verse 19 and Daniel chapter 12 verse 2 speaks of an expectation of a bodily resurrection at the end of time.

And I imagine that we'll look at those verses next week. But that's the Old Testament. Now, what about the New Testament? Well, let's have a look at what Jesus himself taught.

In Luke chapter 20, Jesus has a dispute with the Sadducees. Now, this is a group of Jews who do not believe in a future resurrection. And actually, they don't even seem to believe in a disembodied intermediate state either.

[25 : 02] And we won't get into the details of the actual debate, but what is interesting for our purposes is the way Jesus responds to the Sadducees.

In verse 37 on the screen, Jesus cites the book of Exodus. He says to the Sadducees, God is the God of dead.

He is the God of dead. He is the God of dead. He is the God of dead, but of the living. For to him all are alive.

In other words, Jesus is saying to the Sadducees, God is the God of God.

He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now, those three guys are long dead, and yet God seems to consider them alive in some sense.

[26 : 03] Otherwise, why would he refer himself overtly as the God of these three men? man? And that seems to suggest that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob exist in some sort of intermediate state.

They exist in some form of relationship to God right now. And that is the point that Jesus is making. And then when we go to the end of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus hangs on the cross, well, we find him making this promise to the robber next to him.

on the screen, truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. And so Jesus is promising paradise to this man at the moment of his death.

And more than that, Jesus is saying that this robber is going to be present with him there. Now paradise here obviously cannot mean the new creation, since that hasn't come yet.

And so it makes best sense to think that Jesus is saying to this man, to use post-language from 2 Corinthians, that this man will be away from the body, but at home with the Lord, he's at home with Jesus.

[27 : 23] And that's what paradise means, at least in this particular context. It's a bit like a waiting room, but not like the waiting room of a hospital.

It's more like the first-class lounge of Singapore Airlines at Changi Airport, a place of happiness and bliss, not least because the Lord Jesus himself is there.

Let me mention very quickly one more reference, although we won't read it now. In Revelation chapter 6 verses 9 to 11, we encounter a scene where individuals have been martyred.

they're described in such a way where they appear again to be disembodied, and they are currently residing in God's presence, waiting for the day of resurrection and judgment.

You can look it up yourself later. But that appears to be just one more place that supports this picture of the intermediate state. And like I said, we could go to a couple of other places, but I think that's enough, and I hope, in fact, that that's not information overload.

[28 : 36] But if it is, then just remember this. When a Christian dies, they go to be in God's presence.

They go to be in Jesus' presence. And that appears to be the testimony of the scriptures. When a Christian dies, his relationship with Jesus is not broken like a bad Zoom connection.

No, by God's grace, it continues on. You see, the teaching of the intermediate state is good news indeed. And yet, we must remember, it is not the be all and end all.

There's a reason why it's called the intermediate state. Because that's what it is. Intermediate, not ultimate. Intermediate, not final.

hope is not the intermediate state. It is that future day when we will all enjoy resurrection and thus re-embodiment.

[29 : 48] That's what he's longing for. The intermediate state is but a mere stepping stone to that day. the Christian's ultimate hope is not this disembodied existence, but the resurrection of the body.

The intermediate state is better, but it is not the best. And that's what we can look forward to when we look at the subject of the resurrection body next week.

Now just before I get to the implications of today's teaching, I did promise that I would say a few words on the doctrine of purgatory, and so that's what I'll do now.

This is a doctrine that is taught by the Roman Catholic Church, and it reflects their understanding of the intermediate state. The catechism of the Catholic Church defines purgatory as follows.

It should be on your screen. All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation, but after death, they undergo purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

[31 : 07] The Church gives the name purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the debt.

Now basically this is what the Catholic Church teaches and if you become Catholic, remember this, this is what you're saying that you believe. Catholic teaching says that purgatory is a place or a state of purification which takes place after physical death during the intermediate state to make you fit to enter heaven since you might not have been completely cleansed while you're here on earth.

And so you might have to undergo further temporary suffering to pay off the remaining penalty for what the Catholic Church calls venial sins.

Now for simplicity's sake, just think of venial sins for now as so-called lesser sins. and how long you stay in purgatory, how severe your punishment is, and that kind of thing, all depends on the kind of life you live before death.

It also depends somewhat on other Catholic believers still on earth, who might offer prayers on your behalf, or have masses spoken for you, or by buying what is called an indulgence, so that that indulgence will be issued for you, to kind of help you shorten your stay, as it were.

[32 : 47] On what does the Catholic Church base their teaching on? Their main basis actually comes not from the Scriptures as we have received it, but from a text known as 2 Maccabees 12, verse 34 to 35, part of the Apocrypha, which appears to suggest that sacrifices can be made for the sins of the dead.

By the way, if that has gotten you thinking about how we got the Bible and those kind of questions, please do check our library out. Actually, I meant to put some resources on your outline, but I completely forgot, so maybe what I'll do is later I'll put up a Facebook post or something to suggest those books, and Aaron, our librarian, can probably help you locate them as well.

But if you wanted to know more about that, please do take advantage of our library. Some Catholics also take 1 Corinthians 3, verse 11 to 15, where the passage describes a person being saved as only through fire, as evidence of purgatory.

Now, I hope even from this very brief summary, you can see how official Roman Catholic teaching is miles away from an evangelical Protestant teaching, and not just on the intermediate state, but even on more basic things like the Bible, sin, and salvation.

In our circles, you sometimes hear how Roman Catholics and Protestants like us are basically all the same. That's what some people say. Now, we can and we should treat our Roman Catholic friends with love and with respect, and by all means have a cordial conversation.

[34 : 31] But I hope we can see that it is actually insulting to both parties to insist that there is no difference at all. And in brief response to the Catholic teaching as presented here, I think we can say this.

There is simply no evidence in the Bible, as far as I can see, that this intermediate state is a place of cleansing, or that you can somehow affect your time there by the performance of good deeds by the living.

Now, it's true that we all need to be cleansed from our sin, but we are cleansed and purified completely by Jesus on the cross, whose work we receive by faith, while we are still here on earth. I mean, that's the gospel. Hebrews 9, verse 14 says as much. How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God. And there's just nothing about purgatory there at all. And even the 1 Corinthians 3 passage that is sometimes cited, simply has nothing to do at all with paying for our sins or improving our post-mortem state.

[35 : 50] And in turn, that also means that the Bible never once encourages us to pray for the dead. Remember from last week that when one dies, the whistle is blown, the score line is final, there is no appeal system.

And so purgatory simply cannot be defended on the basis of Scripture. But let's leave purgatory for now, and let me end by considering some implications from the Bible's teaching on the intermediate state.

I hope this is teaching that brings you much relief and much gladness. Now today, I hope I didn't overly minimize the process of death.

I apologize if that seemed to be the case to you. I don't mean to downplay the suffering of those who might be very sick at the moment from things like cancer or from some other disease.

And I don't mean to suggest that it is sinful to feel some anxiety about the prospect of imminent death. But I do want us to see how much the gospel has transformed that moment of death for the Christian.

[37 : 02] As the poet George Herbert so wonderfully puts it, death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.

For in the hands of Jesus, death now becomes simply the entrance to the garden of paradise.

Death is the moment you arrive to be at home with Jesus.

Now the pathway leading up to death could be miserable, but death itself, because of the gospel, is not a miserable pathway.

It is actually the point where all your miseries end. For there will be nothing that will interfere any longer with your enjoyment of God.

Now we often say in this life you will have ups and downs. But in Christ, when you enter the intermediate state, you will only have ups and ups.

[38 : 06] Because in that state, you only get to look forward to even better things. A resurrection body and the new creation. salvation. And this teaching means that we can offer hope to others.

When I was writing this sermon, our brother Silas messaged me to let me know of his classmate who has advanced cancer. And at that point, there were no more treatment options.

And by the time I finished this sermon, he was gone. And it is very sad. But this classmate and his wife are believers.

And that means he is now in the hands of God. His wife doesn't have to wonder where her husband is. Their family will grieve, but they will grieve with hope.

There will be sorrow, but only for the ones left behind. The one departed has actually gained all.

[39 : 12] And finally, this teaching means that we cannot lose heart as death approaches. Now turn with me back to 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 16.

Let me read it. Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, and yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. And so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

Since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. There will definitely be sufferings and afflictions in this life.

And perhaps for some of us, part of those afflictions will be similar to Silas' classmate, of having to bear with a path to death that is painful and distressing.

[40 : 15] But because of Jesus, that pathway of affliction is transformed into a pathway to glory. we cannot as yet literally see what lies beyond death.

But what happens when we die? We will see. And what we will see is better by far. We will see what is eternal.

no, we will see what is fixed. Why so? Because we will see Jesus. As Paul puts it in Philippians chapter 1 verse 21, for me to die is gain, and to live is Christ.

Let us pray. Father, thank you for your word to us this morning.

Father, we understand that for probably all of us, the moment of death can be a very scary thing, can be a thing that fills us with uncertainty.

[41 : 31] But Father, we just pray that through your word this morning that you would indeed strengthen our confidence, strengthen our assurance, that knowing that when we are in Christ, we can be sure that at that moment of death, we are heading to a better place, we are putting on better clothes, we are going home.

And so Father, please give us that assurance today. I pray for those of us who are listening in who might not yet be believers, I pray Lord that indeed they will know this assurance too, that they will put their trust in the Lord Jesus.

And so Father, I just pray that all that we've heard today would be one that will continue to anchor us for this very life. I pray that if I said anything that's wrong or that is inaccurate, that we will just forget it.

But I pray that all the things that are correct and that are faithful to your word would indeed be ones that we would keep in store in our hearts and that would help us as we navigate this life with confidence in you.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.