

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 4

The Constitution of Human Nature

Lesson 13

The Intermediate State

What Happens When We Die?

“The Conscious Existence of the Soul Between Death and Resurrection”

Key Texts: 2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Philippians 1:21–23; Luke 16:19–31; Luke 23:43; Revelation 6:9–11; Ecclesiastes 12:7

“We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

2 Corinthians 5:8, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Every human being who has ever lived will die. Every pastor will stand at a graveside. Every congregation member will lose someone she loves. Every believer will face the ending of her own mortal existence. The doctrine of the intermediate state, what happens to the person between the moment of physical death and the final resurrection of the body at the return of Christ, is therefore not a peripheral academic question but the most personally urgent doctrinal question that the Anthropology series addresses. It is the question that is asked at every deathbed, every funeral, every grief counseling session, every conversation with a dying saint. And the church that does not have a clear, biblically grounded, theologically precise answer to it will send its dying and its bereaved into the valley of the shadow of death armed with nothing but platitudes.

The doctrine of the intermediate state is the natural culmination of the three lessons that precede it in Unit 4. Lesson 11 established that the human person consists of body and soul, and that the soul is genuinely distinct from the body, capable of conscious personal existence separated from the body. Lesson 12 established that the soul has a divine Author and belongs ultimately to the God who made it. Lesson 13 addresses the question that the intersection of these two convictions immediately generates: what happens to the soul when it is separated from the body at death? The answer the Scriptures provide is both theologically precise and pastorally profound: the souls of believers are immediately and consciously in the presence of Christ, while the souls of the unrighteous are in a state of conscious torment and separation from God, and both conditions are temporary, awaiting the final resurrection and the last judgment that will determine the eternal states of both.

This lesson proceeds in six sections. We begin with the intermediate state defined, its temporal boundaries, its character, and its relationship to the final state. We then examine the biblical testimony to the intermediate state of believers, tracing the key texts from Luke 23:43 through 2 Corinthians 5 through Philippians 1 through Revelation 6. The third section examines the intermediate state of the unrighteous through the lens of Luke 16's account of the rich man and Lazarus. The fourth and fifth sections address the two most significant errors the church has generated about the intermediate state, soul sleep and purgatory, with the specific exegetical and theological arguments required to refute each. We close with the pastoral application of the doctrine: what the biblical account of the intermediate state means for the ministry of the church to the dying, the bereaved, and those who face the prospect of their own death with the hope or the fear that the gospel both generates and addresses.

A note about the scope of this lesson in relation to the series' broader eschatology: this lesson addresses specifically the intermediate state, the condition of the soul between death and resurrection. The full eschatological treatment of the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal state of the righteous, and the eternal state of the condemned belongs to a later series in the curriculum. This lesson establishes the anthropological and constitutional foundations, the persistent soul, its conscious existence, its two possible conditions, and its temporary incompleteness, that the full eschatological treatment will require. The student who has worked through the three lessons of Unit 4 together will arrive at the eschatological series equipped with the anthropological framework that eschatology demands.

I. The Intermediate State Defined: Between Death and Resurrection

The Temporal, Constitutional, and Eschatological Character of the In-Between

A. *What the Intermediate State Is and What It Is Not*

The intermediate state is the condition of the human person, specifically, of the soul separated from the body, in the period between physical death and the final resurrection of the body at the return of Jesus Christ. It is defined by three boundaries: it begins at the moment of physical death, when the soul separates from the body; it ends at the resurrection, when the soul is reunited with its glorified body; and it is therefore a temporary state, not the final destination of the human person. The intermediate state is “intermediate” in the precise sense that it stands between two other states, the present embodied existence and the final glorified existence, and shares characteristics of both while being identical to neither. It is better than the present state for the believer (Philippians 1:23: “very much better” than the present) but it is not the final state; it is consciously present with Christ but it is not the fullness of the redemption that the resurrection and the new creation will bring.

What the intermediate state is not is as important for the pastoral and theological clarity of the doctrine as what it is. It is not the final state: the souls of the deceased, whether believers or unbelievers, are not yet in their permanent, eternal condition. For believers, the fullness of redemption awaits the resurrection of the body, the complete renewal of the whole person in the glorified state, and the dwelling of the redeemed with God in the new heavens and the new earth. For unbelievers, the fullness of condemnation awaits the final judgment, the resurrection of the body, and the pronouncement of the eternal sentence. The intermediate state for both is a genuine, conscious, personally experienced condition, but it is a condition that anticipates and awaits the final state rather than constituting it. It is not annihilation: the soul does not cease to exist at death, either for the believer or for the unbeliever. The persistent soul established in Lesson 11 is the theological foundation for the intermediate state, and the doctrine of the intermediate state is in turn the pastoral expression of that foundation. And it is not unconsciousness: the biblical testimony consistently describes the intermediate state in terms of conscious personal experience, conscious fellowship with Christ for the believer, conscious suffering and separation for the unbeliever, and any account that substitutes unconsciousness for the conscious personal existence the Scriptures describe is inadequate to the biblical testimony.

The relationship between the intermediate state and the final resurrection is the relationship of genuine goodness to eschatological fullness. Paul’s language in Philippians 1:21–23 establishes that the intermediate state is genuinely, positively good for the believer: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain ... to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (NASB 1995). But the same Paul who describes the intermediate state as “very much better” than the present also describes it in 2 Corinthians 5:2–4 as a state of “groaning”, not the groaning of suffering, but the groaning of longing for the resurrection that will clothe the soul with its permanent, glorified body. The intermediate state is the condition of the soul that has been freed from the mortal body’s limitations and is at home with the Lord, but that still awaits the fullness of the redemption that the resurrection of the body will bring. It is the “already” of conscious fellowship with Christ experienced by the soul separated from its body, and the “not yet” of the fully embodied, fully glorified, fully redeemed existence that the resurrection will produce.

B. *The Constitutional Foundation: Why the Intermediate State Requires a Persistent Soul*

The doctrine of the intermediate state cannot be coherently maintained without the constitutional doctrine of dichotomy that Lesson 11 established. If the human person simply is her body, if there is no genuinely immaterial, genuinely persistent soul that is capable of conscious personal existence separated from the body, then there is no subject capable of inhabiting the intermediate state. The person is her body; the body dissolves at death; therefore the person ceases to exist at death, and the intermediate state is not a state of the person but an absence of the person. The only alternatives available to the physicalist are soul sleep (the person somehow persists in an unconscious state until the resurrection) and immediate resurrection (the person is resurrected at

the moment of death, bypassing the intermediate state entirely), and both of these alternatives fail to account for the biblical testimony that the section below will examine.

The dichotomist's constitutional framework, by contrast, naturally and coherently accounts for the intermediate state: at death, the immaterial soul separates from the material body; the soul, being genuinely immaterial and genuinely persistent, continues to exist in conscious personal experience; and the soul's condition in the intermediate state, the conscious presence of the believer's soul with Christ, or the conscious suffering of the unbeliever's soul in Hades, is the direct consequence of the character of its relationship to God during the embodied life that has just ended. The soul carries with it into the intermediate state the personal identity, the relational history, the covenant status, and the character that were its in the embodied life: it is the same person, consciously experiencing the consequences of what the embodied life was and what it was not. The intermediate state is the first phase of the consequences of the embodied life; the resurrection and the final judgment are the second and final phase.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 provides the constitutional description of what death involves from the perspective of the human person's two components: "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." The body, the dust, returns to the earth; the spirit, the immaterial soul, returns to God. The parallelism describes the dissolution of the soul-body union that constitutes the living person, and attributes each component's dissolution to its appropriate destination. The spirit's return to God who gave it is not the spirit's annihilation; it is the spirit's separation from the body and its placement in the hands of the God who created it and who will determine its condition in the intermediate state based on the character of its relationship to Him. Ecclesiastes 12:7 does not specify the conscious character of the spirit's existence in the intermediate state; the New Testament texts examined in the next section will supply that specificity.

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain ... having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better."

Philippians 1:21, 23, NASB 1995

II. The Believer's Intermediate State: At Home with the Lord

What the New Testament Reveals About Dying and Being with Christ

A. Luke 23:43 and the Immediacy of the Believer's Presence with Christ

The most theologically concentrated and most personally specific statement of the believer's intermediate state in the entire New Testament is Jesus's promise to the dying thief on the cross: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, NASB 1995). Three features of this verse are of decisive theological significance. First, the word "today" (σήμερον, σήμερον): Jesus does not say "sometime after the resurrection" or "when the age to come has fully arrived" or "after a period of preparation". He says today. On the day of the thief's death, which is also the day of Jesus's own death, the thief will be in the paradise of the Lord's presence. The immediacy of the promise is unambiguous and was understood as such by the church from the earliest period.

Second, the personal character of the promise: "with Me." The paradise to which the thief is promised is not a location the thief will inhabit in the absence of the Lord; it is a state of personal fellowship "with Me", with the risen and living Lord whose presence constitutes the paradise. The intermediate state for the believer is not primarily characterized by a place but by a Person: the condition of the believer's soul in the intermediate state is defined by its personal, conscious, relational presence with Christ. Whatever "paradise" names, and the word (paradeisos, παράδεισος) derives from the Persian word for a beautiful garden and is used in the Septuagint for Eden, it names the condition of being with Christ, and the quality of the condition is the quality of Christ's

presence. Third, the pastoral context: Jesus speaks this promise to a dying criminal who has just acknowledged his own guilt (“we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds,” v. 41) and has confessed Jesus as the Lord of His coming kingdom (v. 42). The promise is made not to the spiritually advanced but to the dying penitent, establishing that the entrance into the paradise of Christ’s presence is not the reward of accumulated virtue but the gift of grace received through faith in the moment of death.

Acts 7:59 confirms the personal, Christological character of the believer’s entry into the intermediate state through the first Christian martyr’s dying prayer: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen, being stoned to death, entrusts his spirit into the hands of the Lord Jesus in language that parallels Jesus’s own dying entrusting of His spirit to the Father (“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit,” Luke 23:46). The dying believer’s spirit is received by the Lord Jesus, which presupposes both the spirit’s continued personal existence after separation from the body and the Lord’s active, personal, receiving engagement with the departing soul. The martyr’s prayer is not a metaphor for a peaceful death; it is a specific theological affirmation about what happens to the soul at death: it is received by the Lord Jesus into the conscious, personal fellowship that the intermediate state for the believer consists in.

B. 2 Corinthians 5:1–8, Philippians 1:21–23, and Revelation 6:9–11

Paul’s meditation in 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10 provides the most sustained theological account of the intermediate state in the Pauline corpus, and its specific language about the believer’s condition between death and resurrection has been examined in detail in Lesson 11. The key verse for the intermediate state specifically is 5:8: “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” The phrase “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” (*endēmountes pros ton kyrion*), “at home with” carrying the sense of intimate personal presence, the way one is at home with a dear friend, describes the quality of the soul’s existence with Christ in the intermediate state. It is not merely the soul’s proximity to Christ but the soul’s dwelling with Christ in the same sense that a person is “at home” with the one who is most familiar and most beloved. The intermediate state for the believer is the condition of being at home, genuinely, personally, consciously at home, with the Lord.

Philippians 1:21–23 provides the most personally felt account of the intermediate state in Paul’s letters. The apostle considers his own death and evaluates it from the perspective of his relationship to Christ: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain ... But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (NASB 1995). Three specific features of the passage are important for the theology of the intermediate state. First, the evaluative comparison: Paul compares the present embodied existence (“to live is Christ”, which is itself genuinely good) with the state after death (“to die is gain”, which is better), and concludes that the intermediate state is “very much better.” The comparative “very much better” (*pollō μᾶλλον krebtton*, a double comparative, better-better) is not the language of equivalence or mere adequacy; it is the language of genuine superiority. The intermediate state is genuinely, substantially better than the present life, for the believer who has been united to Christ. Second, the reason for the superiority: “to depart and be with Christ.” The superiority of the intermediate state is entirely Christological: the intermediate state is better because it is the condition of being with Christ without the limitations and the distractions of embodied mortal existence. Third, the personal character: Paul does not speak of his own consciousness ceasing and of a better state resuming at the resurrection; he speaks of his own departure and his own being with Christ, a continuous personal experience that is his, personally and immediately, at death.

Revelation 6:9–11 provides a third dimension of the biblical testimony to the intermediate state of believers, adding the specific detail that the souls of the martyrs in heaven are conscious, communicative, and emotionally engaged: “I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (NASB 1995). The souls are visible (John “saw” them), localized (they are “underneath the altar” in the heavenly

throne room), vocal (they “cried out with a loud voice”), emotionally engaged (they are concerned for justice and vindication), and communicatively responsive (they receive an answer from God, vv. 10–11). This is not the picture of unconscious souls resting in an undifferentiated spiritual state; it is the picture of conscious, active, personally engaged souls in the presence of God, participating in the heavenly life while their final vindication awaits the return of Christ. The intermediate state for the martyrs is conscious, Christological, and teleologically oriented: they are with the Lord and they are awaiting the consummation.

III. The Unbeliever’s Intermediate State: The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19–31 and the Biblical Teaching on Conscious Torment After Death

A. The Narrative and Its Theological Content

Luke 16:19–31 is the most detailed account of the intermediate state in the entire New Testament, and the only passage in the Gospels that gives sustained narrative description of the condition of souls after death before the resurrection. The parable, or, more precisely, the illustrated account, since Jesus does not introduce it with the conventional parabolic formula, describes the deaths of two men: a wealthy man who lived in luxury and a poor man named Lazarus who lay at his gate in misery. After both die, the narrative continues: Lazarus is “carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (v. 22, NASB 1995), while the rich man is “buried, and in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment” (v. 23, NASB 1995). The spatial separation between the two is described as a “great chasm” (v. 26) that cannot be crossed in either direction.

The theological content of the passage requires careful extraction from its narrative form. Several features are theologically decisive. First, both men are conscious after death: Lazarus is in a state described as comfort and fellowship with Abraham, while the rich man is in a state described explicitly and repeatedly as torment (basános, βάσανος, v. 23, 28). Second, the rich man retains his personal identity, his memories, and his relational connections: he recognizes Abraham, he identifies Lazarus by name, he remembers his five brothers living on the earth (v. 28), and he engages in intelligent, purposeful conversation, first requesting relief and then requesting that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers. This is not the behavior of an unconscious or undifferentiated soul; it is the behavior of a fully conscious, personally engaged individual whose identity is entirely intact and whose existence is characterized by genuine, specific suffering. Third, the condition of the rich man is not remedial but judicial: he is not in Hades for purification on the way to a better state; he is in Hades because the pattern of his earthly life, his indifference to the suffering of Lazarus at his gate, has been judged and found wanting, and the great chasm established by that judgment cannot be crossed.

The question of the genre of Luke 16:19–31, whether it is a parable (which might be interpreted symbolically throughout) or a historical account (which would be interpreted more directly), bears on the theological use of its details. Jesus introduces the passage with “there was a rich man” (anthrōpos de tis ēn plousios, ἄνθρωπος δέ τις ἦν πλούσιος) without the conventional parabolic introduction, and He names one of the characters, Lazarus, a detail that Jesus’s other parables do not include. Whether the passage is strictly historical or illustrative, the theological teaching it conveys about the intermediate state is consistent with the broader New Testament testimony: the soul continues to exist consciously after death, in conditions determined by its relationship to God in the embodied life, and the conditions of the two possible intermediate states (Lazarus’s comfort and the rich man’s torment) are separated by an unbridgeable divide. The theological substance of the passage is not decorative; it is the point.

B. Hades, Gehenna, and the Distinction Between the Intermediate and Final States

The New Testament’s vocabulary for the states of the dead requires careful attention to avoid the confusion between the intermediate and final states that popular Christian usage has often generated. Two Greek terms are particularly important: Hadēs (Ἅιδης) and Geheōna (Γέεννα). Hadēs is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol, the realm of the dead, the place where the souls of the departed exist in the intermediate state. In the Old

Testament, Sheol is the undifferentiated realm of the dead without the specific New Testament distinction between the conditions of the righteous and the unrighteous in the intermediate state. In the New Testament, the picture is developed: Luke 16:22–23 portrays Hadēs as the realm in which the souls of the unrighteous are in conscious torment while awaiting the final judgment, while the souls of the righteous are in the comforting presence of God (in the narrative, “Abraham’s bosom”). Hadēs is a temporary state: Revelation 20:14 describes the final judgment as the casting of Hadēs itself into “the lake of fire”, a picture of the termination of the intermediate state for the unrighteous and the commencement of the final state.

Geheōna (Gehenna, derived from the Hebrew Ge-Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem, which had been the site of child sacrifices and had become a picture of divine judgment) is the New Testament’s term for the final state of the condemned, the eternal punishment that follows the final judgment. Matthew 10:28’s reference to the One who can “destroy both soul and body in hell” uses Gehenna, establishing Gehenna as the final state of both soul and body after the resurrection and the last judgment. Jesus’s references to Gehenna in the Gospels (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 18:9; 23:33; Mark 9:43–48) consistently describe it as the permanent, irreversible consequence of persistent unrepentance and unbelief, the eternal fire, the eternal worm, the outer darkness. The distinction between Hadēs (the intermediate state of the unrighteous) and Gehenna (the final state of the condemned) is theologically important because it preserves the distinction between the intermediate and final states for the unrighteous that parallels the distinction between the intermediate state (with Christ) and the final state (resurrection, new creation) for the righteous.

The biblical picture of the unbeliever’s intermediate state is one that the church has consistently struggled to hold with both theological fidelity and pastoral sensitivity. The fidelity requires the honest acknowledgment of what the Scriptures teach: that the souls of those who die outside of Christ are in a conscious state of torment and separation from God between death and the final judgment, a state that, while not the final Gehenna, is genuinely and specifically terrible. The sensitivity requires the recognition that this teaching is not designed to produce cruelty toward the dying or a triumphant satisfaction in the prospect of the condemned’s suffering; it is designed to produce the urgency of gospel proclamation. The knowledge that every human being who dies outside of Christ enters a condition of conscious suffering that will be confirmed and intensified at the final judgment is the most powerful possible motivation for the church’s evangelistic mission. The intermediate state of the unrighteous is not a reason for despair about those who die without Christ; it is a reason for the kind of urgent, compassionate, gospel-saturated ministry that takes seriously what is at stake in the life and death of every human being the church has the opportunity to reach.

“Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

Luke 23:43, NASB 1995

IV. Against Soul Sleep: The Scriptures Do Not Teach Unconsciousness at Death

Why the Language of Sleep Refers to the Body, Not the State of the Soul

A. The Soul Sleep Doctrine and Its Appeal

Soul sleep, the doctrine that the soul enters an unconscious state at death and remains unconscious until the resurrection, has been held by a variety of Christian traditions throughout church history, including certain Anabaptist groups in the Reformation period and, in modern times, the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition and the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Its appeal is understandable: it appears to honor the Scriptures’ consistent use of “sleep” language for death (Matthew 27:52; John 11:11–14; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–15), it appears to avoid the philosophical difficulties of a disembodied conscious existence, and it appears to

sidestep the perceived Platonic dualism of a soul happily floating free of the body in a purely spiritual state while awaiting the resurrection. For sincere Christians who have been exposed to the soul sleep argument, the language of Scripture about the dead “sleeping” is sufficiently prominent that the doctrine deserves a careful and respectful response rather than a dismissive one.

The crucial exegetical point in response to soul sleep is the identification of the referent of the “sleep” language in the relevant texts. When the New Testament describes the dead as “sleeping,” the sleep metaphor consistently refers to the appearance and the condition of the body, the body that lies in the grave in apparent sleep, visually indistinguishable from a person who is sleeping, rather than to the condition of the soul. The metaphor is appropriate because the body, like the sleeping person, will be “awakened” from its apparent sleep at the resurrection, not because the soul is unconscious in the way that the sleeping person is unconscious. Jesus’s use of the sleep metaphor in John 11:11–14 is particularly instructive: He says “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep” (v. 11), and when the disciples misunderstand this as literal sleep (v. 12), Jesus clarifies “Lazarus is dead” (v. 14). The metaphor is about death, not about the conscious state of the soul. And the bodily resurrection that Jesus subsequently performs is the “awakening” the metaphor anticipates, the body’s coming back to life, not the soul’s return to consciousness.

The decisive refutation of soul sleep, however, is not primarily the exegesis of the sleep metaphor but the positive testimony of the key intermediate-state texts. If the soul is unconscious between death and resurrection, then Jesus’s promise to the dying thief, “today you shall be with Me in Paradise”, is either false or meaningless, because the thief’s soul will not consciously experience the paradise that Jesus promises until the resurrection. If the soul is unconscious, then Paul’s evaluation of death as “gain” and as “very much better” than the present embodied existence is either false or incoherent, because an unconscious state is not “gain” in any meaningful sense. If the soul is unconscious, then Paul’s preference for being “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” is either false or meaningless, because the unconscious soul cannot be at home with anyone. And if the souls under the altar in Revelation 6 are conscious enough to cry out to God for justice and to receive an answer, then the soul sleep doctrine is simply incompatible with what the text describes. The cumulative force of these positive texts is the strongest possible argument against soul sleep: the biblical testimony to the conscious intermediate state is too direct, too personal, and too specific to be accommodated by the sleep doctrine.

B. *The Sleep of the Body and the Wakefulness of the Soul*

The Reformed tradition’s response to soul sleep has consistently distinguished between the sleep of the body, which the Scriptures’ sleep metaphor consistently describes, and the conscious wakefulness of the soul that the intermediate-state texts consistently imply. The body sleeps in the grave; the soul is awake with the Lord. The body awaits its resurrection; the soul is already in the presence of the One whose resurrection guarantees its own. This distinction is not a Greek dualism that privileges the soul at the expense of the body; it is the biblical account of what happens at the moment of death to each of the two genuinely constitutive components of the human person: the body, being material, is laid in the earth to await the resurrection; the soul, being immaterial and persistent, is immediately in the presence of Christ.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s answer to Q&A 37 captures the Reformed consensus on the believer’s intermediate state with characteristic precision and pastoral warmth: “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.” Three theological affirmations are packed into this single sentence. First, the souls of believers are “made perfect in holiness” at death: the sanctification that was progressive and incomplete in the embodied life is completed at the moment of death, so that the soul that enters the presence of Christ is a purified soul, freed from the indwelling sin that still troubled the believer in her mortal life. Second, they “immediately pass into glory”: there is no interval between the moment of death and the soul’s entry into the presence of Christ, no period of unconsciousness, no transitional purgatorial state. Third, the bodies “rest in their

graves till the resurrection”: the bodily rest is the sleep the Scriptures’ metaphor describes, and it is a temporary rest that anticipates the awakening of the resurrection.

The pastoral implication of the rejection of soul sleep is immediate and comforting: the believer who dies today is not waiting, unconscious, for the resurrection to experience the presence of Christ. She has passed immediately into that presence. The years, the decades, or the centuries between the believer’s death and the resurrection are not experienced as years by the soul that is with the Lord; the intermediate state is a present, continuous, conscious reality for the soul that has departed. The dying believer who asks “what will it be like?” can be told with biblical confidence: it will be to wake in the presence of the One who is dearest to you, who died for you, who calls you by name, and who has been waiting, if we can use such language, for this moment of reunion. The sleep of the body will be long; the wakefulness of the soul will be immediate and unbroken.

V. Against Purgatory: The Believer Is Fully Justified in Christ

Why the Roman Catholic Doctrine of Post-Mortem Purification Is Without Biblical Warrant

A. The Doctrine of Purgatory Stated and Evaluated

Purgatory, the Roman Catholic doctrine that the souls of those who die in the state of grace but with unconfessed venial sins or the “temporal punishment” due to confessed sins still outstanding undergo a process of purification after death before entering the fullness of heaven, is perhaps the most doctrinally consequential error about the intermediate state in the history of Christian thought. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) defined the doctrine with precision: the souls of those who die in charity but still requiring purification are aided by the prayers of the faithful and especially by the sacrifice of the Mass. The doctrine requires a distinction between “mortal” sin (which destroys the state of grace and requires sacramental confession and absolution for forgiveness) and “venial” sin (which weakens the state of grace but does not destroy it) and between the forgiveness of sin and the temporal punishment that remains due after forgiveness. It is specifically the temporal punishment, insufficiently satisfied in the earthly life through penance and other satisfactions, that purgatory is designed to discharge.

The Reformation’s rejection of purgatory was grounded primarily in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If the believer is fully justified, if the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer completely and irrevocably through faith, and if the penalty of sin is fully borne by Christ in His substitutionary atonement, then there is no remaining temporal punishment for the believer to discharge in purgatory, because the penalty has already been fully satisfied. The distinction between the forgiveness of sin and the temporal punishment due to sin that purgatory requires is a distinction that the Reformation rejected as unscriptural and inconsistent with the sufficiency of the atonement. Romans 8:1, “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995), does not say “no final condemnation” or “no eternal condemnation.” It says no condemnation, a comprehensive statement that leaves no room for a post-mortem purificatory suffering that the atonement has already fully addressed.

The specific scriptural evidence marshaled by the Reformation against purgatory includes several key passages. John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (NASB 1995), the believer has already passed out of death into life; there is no intermediate realm of death/purification between the present life and the eternal life that faith possesses. Luke 23:43: Jesus promises the thief paradise “today”, not after a period of purification. Philippians 1:23’s description of the intermediate state as “very much better” than the present life is incompatible with a state of suffering and purgatorial punishment that must be endured before the full joy of heaven is available. And Hebrews 9:27, “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (NASB 1995), establishes a binary between this life and the judgment without any intermediate purgatorial state, suggesting that the time for the decisive choices that determine the soul’s eternal condition is entirely coextensive with the mortal life.

B. *The Believer's Immediate Entrance into Glory and the Westminster Standards*

The Reformed rejection of purgatory is not merely a negative argument against Roman Catholic doctrine; it is the positive affirmation of the completeness and the sufficiency of the justification that the believer possesses in Christ. The believer who dies does not enter purgatory because there is nothing in her relationship to God that requires purification after death in the purgatorial sense: not because she is without sin (she is not, and the remaining sin of the believer is one of the reasons for the urgency of sanctification in the present life), but because the sin that remains in her has been fully atoned for by the blood of Christ, fully forgiven in the justification received by faith, and will be completely removed from the soul, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches, at the moment of death itself. The purification of the soul at death is not a process of post-mortem satisfaction for temporal punishments outstanding; it is the instantaneous completion of the sanctification that the Spirit has been progressively accomplishing in the believer throughout the embodied life, now brought to its perfect conclusion in the moment of the soul's entry into the presence of the perfectly holy God.

The pastoral implication of the rejection of purgatory is as comforting as the rejection of soul sleep: the dying believer does not face a period of suffering after death that she must endure before she arrives in the presence of Christ. She passes immediately, not through purgatory, but into the presence of the Lord whose atoning sacrifice has already secured her full acceptance. She is not arriving in the presence of God as a partially justified, partially purified soul that must complete the work of satisfaction that the earthly life left unfinished; she is arriving as one whom Christ has "made perfect in holiness" (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 37) in the moment of her departure, fully and finally righteous in her Savior's imputed righteousness. This is the pastoral comfort that the Reformation recovered from the Scriptures and that the doctrine of the intermediate state is designed to provide: not the anxiety of a soul uncertain whether it has adequately satisfied the demands of divine justice, but the confidence of a soul that knows its Savior has satisfied those demands perfectly and completely on its behalf.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory has one genuine insight that the Reformed rejection of the doctrine must not obscure: the recognition that the believer who dies does so as a sinner who is not yet fully conformed to the holiness of God. This is true, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism's affirmation that the souls of believers are "made perfect in holiness" at death is the Reformed account of how this genuine deficiency is addressed, not by post-mortem suffering but by the instantaneous completion of the Spirit's sanctifying work in the moment of the soul's entry into the presence of the holy God. The insight is correct; the remedy the Catholic tradition proposes is wrong. The remedy the Scriptures provide is not purgatorial suffering but the completed work of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit whose renewing work in the believer's present life is moving steadily toward the full conformity to Christ's image that the intermediate state completes and the resurrection perfects.

VI. The Pastoral Comfort: Death Is the Doorway into the Presence of Christ

What the Doctrine of the Intermediate State Means for Dying, Grieving, and Living

The doctrine of the intermediate state is not a matter of doctrinal curiosity; it is the theological foundation of the church's entire ministry to the dying and the bereaved. The pastor who stands at the bedside of a dying saint is not a hospice worker offering secular comfort; she is a herald of specific theological realities about what is happening to the person before her and what is about to happen to the soul that is preparing to depart the body. And the theological realities she heralds, if the biblical account of the intermediate state is what it has been shown in this lesson to be, are as comforting as any reality the human heart can receive: death is not annihilation, not unconsciousness, and not a transition into a state of painful waiting. It is, for the believer, the immediate entrance into the conscious, personal, fully accepted presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been preparing this place for this person and who receives this soul with the welcome of the One who has loved her with an everlasting love.

Paul's account of the Christian's relationship to death in 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 is the doxological expression of the confidence that the doctrine of the intermediate state grounds: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (NASB 1995). Death's sting, the fear, the finality, the sense of annihilation, is removed by the gospel: the intermediate state is the proof that death is not what it appears to be, that the dissolution of the body is not the dissolution of the person, and that the believer who dies in Christ passes immediately into a condition that is "very much better" than anything the present life can offer. The church that holds this conviction will preach and celebrate funerals differently, will sit at bedsides differently, will comfort the bereaved differently, not with the denial of grief, which is genuine and right, but with the specific, Christological, resurrection-oriented hope that transforms grief from despair into the mourning of those who grieve with confident expectation of reunion.

The doctrine of the intermediate state also shapes the way the church ministers to the dying themselves. The person who is preparing to die does not need to be told that everything will be fine in a vague and undefined way; she needs to be told the specific, theologically grounded truth about what is about to happen to her. She needs to hear Luke 23:43, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise", and to know that Jesus's promise to the dying thief is the same promise that His gospel extends to her. She needs to hear Philippians 1:21–23 and to know that the apostle who wrote those words was not engaging in wishful thinking but in theological reasoning grounded in the character of the One who conquered death by rising from it. She needs to hear Acts 7:59 and to know that she too can pray, as the first martyr prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit", and that the Lord who received Stephen's spirit will receive hers. And she needs to know that the Unit 4 she is completing, the unit of her own mortal existence, with its constitutional complexity and its fallen condition and its partial restoration and its persistent longing, is being completed in the presence of the One who will bring it to its final, glorified, whole-person perfection in the resurrection that the intermediate state anticipates and the gospel guarantees.

"O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? ... but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 15:55, 57, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Intermediate State	The condition of the human soul in the period between physical death and the final resurrection of the body at the return of Christ. The intermediate state is defined by its constitutional character (the soul separated from the body), its temporal boundaries (from death to resurrection), and its experiential quality (conscious personal existence in either the presence of Christ for the believer or conscious torment for the unbeliever). The intermediate state is temporary: the final state for both the redeemed and the condemned involves the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, and the permanent establishment of either eternal blessedness or eternal condemnation.
Paradise	From the Greek <i>paradeisos</i> (παράδεισος), derived from the Persian word for a beautiful garden; used in the Septuagint for the garden of Eden. In the New Testament, paradise is used to describe the heavenly realm of the intermediate state for believers (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7). Jesus's promise to the dying thief, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), identifies paradise with the immediate, conscious presence of Christ into which the believer enters at death. The quality of paradise is the quality of Christ's presence, not the quality of a particular location.
Hades (Ἅιδης)	The Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol, the realm of the dead in the intermediate state. In the New Testament, Hades is the condition of the souls of those who have died, with the distinction between the comforting state of the righteous and the tormenting state of the unrighteous increasingly specified (Luke 16:19–31). Hades is temporary: at the final judgment, Hades is cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), signaling the end of the intermediate state for the unrighteous and the commencement of their final, eternal condemnation in Gehenna.
Gehenna (Γέεννα)	The New Testament term for the final state of the condemned, the eternal punishment that follows the resurrection of the condemned and the final judgment. Derived from the Hebrew Ge-Hinnom (the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem, associated with pagan child sacrifices). Gehenna is distinguished from Hades (the intermediate state of the unrighteous) as the permanent, post-resurrection, post-judgment state of the condemned, involving both soul and body in their reunited, condemned form. Jesus uses Gehenna in Matthew 10:28 ("destroy both soul and body in hell") to describe the final state of the person condemned at the last judgment.
Soul Sleep	The doctrine that the soul enters an unconscious state at death and remains unconscious until awakened by the resurrection. Associated historically with certain Anabaptist groups, the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Soul sleep is rejected by the Reformed tradition on the basis of the positive biblical testimony to the conscious intermediate state: Luke 23:43 ("today you shall be with Me in Paradise"), Philippians 1:23 ("very much better" to depart and be with Christ), 2 Corinthians 5:8 ("at home with the Lord"), and Revelation 6:9–11 (conscious souls crying out to God). The sleep language in the Scriptures refers to the appearance of the body in death, not to the condition of the soul.

Purgatory	The Roman Catholic doctrine, defined at the Council of Florence (1439) and the Council of Trent (1563), that the souls of those who die in the state of grace but with venial sins or temporal punishments outstanding undergo a process of purification after death before entering the fullness of heaven. The Protestant Reformation rejected purgatory on the grounds that (1) the justification of the believer is complete and irrevocable through faith in Christ's atoning work, leaving no temporal punishment for the believer to discharge; (2) the biblical testimony places believers immediately in the presence of Christ after death (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8); and (3) Hebrews 9:27 establishes a binary between this life and judgment without an intermediate purgatorial state.
Abraham's Bosom	The expression used in Luke 16:22 for the condition of Lazarus in the intermediate state after death: "the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom." The phrase describes a position of honored intimacy, the way a honored guest reclines in the position closest to the host at a banquet, and is used to describe the condition of the righteous dead in the intermediate state as one of comfort, honor, and fellowship with the patriarchal community of the redeemed. The passage uses Abraham as the representative of the redeemed in the intermediate state, and the spatial separation between Abraham's bosom and the torment of the rich man illustrates the unbridgeable distinction between the two conditions of the intermediate state.
No Condemnation (Romans 8:1)	The apostolic declaration in Romans 8:1 that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This verse is a primary basis for the Reformed rejection of purgatory: the word "no" (<i>oudēn, oudén</i>) is comprehensive and absolute, leaving no room for a post-mortem purgatorial punishment that constitutes a form of condemnation for the believer. The justification that the believer receives in Christ is not partial or provisional; it is complete, irrevocable, and sufficient to eliminate every form of condemnation, including the temporal punishment that the Catholic doctrine of purgatory requires to remain after forgiveness.
Perfect in Holiness	The Westminster Shorter Catechism's description (Q&A 37) of the condition of the believer's soul at death: "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." The perfection of holiness at death is the instantaneous completion of the sanctification that the Spirit has been progressively accomplishing in the believer throughout the embodied life, not a purgatorial process of post-mortem purification but the immediate, Spirit-worked completion of the renewal of the image that regeneration began, brought to its perfect conclusion in the moment of the soul's entry into the presence of the perfectly holy God. It is distinguished from glorification (the perfection of the whole person, body and soul, at the resurrection).
Incompleteness of the Intermediate State	The theological recognition that the intermediate state, while genuinely good for the believer (Philippians 1:23: "very much better"), is not the final state of the redeemed. The believer in the intermediate state is with Christ but without her body; she awaits the resurrection that will restore the body to its glorified wholeness and the new creation in which the fully embodied, fully glorified, fully redeemed whole person will dwell with God forever. The groaning of 2 Corinthians 5:2–4 is the expression of this incompleteness: the soul that is with the Lord still longs for the resurrection clothing that will make the redemption complete. The intermediate state is the "already" of conscious fellowship with Christ and the

	"not yet" of the fully embodied eschatological existence that the resurrection will bring.
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Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe the full content of the biblical testimony to the intermediate state, holding the several specific affirmations in tension rather than allowing any one of them to collapse into the others. The immediate, conscious, personal fellowship with Christ for the believer at death (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23) must be held alongside the incompleteness of the intermediate state that awaits the resurrection for its fullness (2 Corinthians 5:2–4; Romans 8:23). The consciousness of the intermediate state, against soul sleep, must be held alongside the full and final character of the condemned's eventual destination, against any softening of what the Scriptures teach about the intermediate and final states of the unrighteous. And the immediate entrance of the believer into the presence of Christ, against purgatory, must be held alongside the genuine holiness of God's presence, which requires the completion of sanctification in the believer at the moment of death.

We must also believe the pastoral urgency that the intermediate state of the unrighteous generates. If the souls of those who die without Christ enter a condition of conscious suffering and separation from God that is confirmed and intensified at the final judgment, then the evangelistic mission of the church is not merely important in an abstract theological sense; it is urgently, personally, concretely important for every specific human being the church has the opportunity to reach. The doctrine of the intermediate state is not a reason for despair about those who die without Christ; it is a reason for the most urgent and the most compassionate gospel proclamation, conducted with the full awareness of what is at stake in the life and death of every person who has not yet been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the doctrine of the intermediate state for the believer cultivate in you the specific quality of Christological longing that Philippians 1:21–23 describes. Paul does not merely tolerate the prospect of death; he desires it, “having the desire to depart and be with Christ.” This desire is not the morbid preoccupation with death that the culture's therapeutic tradition rightly discourages; it is the healthy, Christological longing of the person who loves the Lord and who understands that the mortal life, however genuinely precious, is a veil between the believer and the fullness of the fellowship with Christ that death will remove. The believer who holds the intermediate state with this clarity will find in the prospect of death not a terror to be managed but a threshold to be approached with the confidence of one who knows what waits on the other side: not darkness, not annihilation, not an uncertain waiting, but the face of the One who conquered death by dying.

Desire also the specific quality of gospel urgency that the intermediate state of the unrighteous generates. The knowledge that every human being who dies outside of Christ enters a condition of conscious suffering, and awaits a final judgment that will confirm and eternalize that condition, is the knowledge that makes the church's evangelistic mission the most urgent possible use of the time and energy the church possesses. The pastor who holds this doctrine with genuine conviction will not treat evangelism as a peripheral program; she will treat it as the most directly responsive action available to a community that has been told specifically, clearly, and by the Lord's own teaching, what happens to the souls of those who die without reconciliation to God through faith in Christ.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Prepare a pastoral account of the intermediate state suitable for delivery at a hospital bedside, a graveside service, or a pastoral counseling session with a dying saint or a bereaved family. The account should be theologically grounded (drawing on the key texts: Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:21–23, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Revelation 6:9–11) and pastorally accessible (avoiding theological jargon, speaking to the specific emotional

and spiritual needs of the context). Write it out in full and practice delivering it in a way that is both theologically precise and personally warm.

- Examine the liturgical practices of the congregation you serve in light of the doctrine of the intermediate state. How adequately does the funeral service (or memorial service, or graveside service) communicate the specific theological realities of the intermediate state? Does it convey the immediate entrance of the believer into the conscious presence of Christ (against soul sleep)? Does it communicate the completeness of the believer's justification and the instantaneous perfection of holiness at death (against purgatory)? Does it hold the genuine grief of bodily death alongside the genuine confidence of Christological hope? And does it point toward the resurrection as the final and fullest expression of the Christian hope, rather than treating the intermediate state as if it were the final destination?
- **Read the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 57–58 on the resurrection of the body, Q&A 42–44 on the benefit of the death of Christ for the Christian, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 37–38 on the condition of the believer's soul at death and the resurrection.** These confessional statements, read together with the key biblical texts of this lesson, provide the most concise and most theologically precise summary of the Reformed account of the intermediate state available in the tradition.
- Identify one person in your congregation or community who is dying or who has recently experienced bereavement, and commit to a specific pastoral engagement with them that is explicitly grounded in the doctrine of the intermediate state. Bring Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, or 2 Corinthians 5:8 to the conversation, not as proof texts to be recited, but as the theological ground of the specific comfort and hope you are offering. Ask yourself afterward: did the doctrine function as genuine pastoral comfort in this specific conversation, or did it remain abstract? What would it take to make it more concretely present in the pastoral care you offer?
- Spend time this week in prayerful preparation for your own death. The *ars moriendi*, the art of dying well, was a central feature of the church's pastoral formation from the medieval period through the Reformation, and the Reformed tradition has consistently regarded the preparation for death as an important dimension of the Christian life. In light of what this lesson has established about the intermediate state, the immediate presence of Christ, the perfection of holiness at death, the incompleteness of the intermediate state and its teleological orientation toward the resurrection, write a brief meditation (one page) on what you believe, hope, and expect at the moment of your own death. Hold nothing back theologically, and let the specific content of the biblical testimony shape the specific character of your expectation.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What was your understanding of the intermediate state before this lesson? Did you believe that the souls of the dead are conscious? Did you have a clear distinction between the intermediate state and the final state? Did you have any exposure to the soul sleep or purgatory doctrines? Share your prior understanding, and identify the single most significant thing the lesson has added to, confirmed, or corrected in that prior understanding.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Luke 23:39–43 carefully. What is the spiritual and moral condition of the dying thief at the time of Jesus’s promise, and what does the penitent thief affirm about Jesus? What is the specific content of the promise Jesus makes in verse 43, what three elements does it contain (the time, the personal fellowship, and the destination)? How does each element of the promise bear on the theological questions raised by soul sleep and purgatory? What does the promise imply about the nature of the intermediate state for every believer who dies in faith?
- Read Philippians 1:19–26 in full. What is Paul’s specific situation as he writes, and how does that situation prompt his reflection on the relative merits of life and death? What does the comparison “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (v. 21) suggest about the quality of the intermediate state relative to the present embodied life? What does the double comparative “very much better” in verse 23 add to the picture? And what does the phrase “to depart and be with Christ” suggest about the continuity of personal identity between the present life and the intermediate state?
- Read Luke 16:19–31 in full. What specific details does Jesus provide about the conditions of the two men in the intermediate state, what they experience, what they are capable of (sensation, memory, communication, recognition, concern for others), and how the two conditions relate to each other? What does the “great chasm” of verse 26 suggest about the reversibility of the intermediate state’s conditions? And what does Abraham’s final response about Moses and the prophets (v. 31) suggest about the relationship between the intermediate state narrative and the sufficiency of the Scriptures for evangelism?
- Read 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 as a unit. What is the primary contrast Paul draws between the present embodied state and the future state? What does the “groaning” of verses 2–4 describe, and why does the believer groan, is it from dissatisfaction with the present life, or from longing for the fullness of the resurrected life? What does the tension between “being at home with the Lord” (v. 8) and “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (v. 10) suggest about the relationship between the intermediate state and the final accountability?
- Read Revelation 6:9–11. In what context does this vision of the souls under the altar occur, what is happening in the narrative of the Revelation? What specific attributes or capacities do the souls demonstrate in this passage (presence, voice, petition, memory, identity)? What is the specific content of their petition, and what does the divine response in verse 11 indicate about the relationship between the intermediate state and the final judgment? How does this passage function as evidence against soul sleep?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the “sleep” language of the New Testament for death (John 11:11–14; 1 Corinthians 15:51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–15) refers to the appearance and condition of the body rather than the state of the soul, and that the positive intermediate-state texts are the decisive refutation of soul sleep. Do you find this argument persuasive? Are there specific sleep-of-death texts that you find more difficult to account for on the dichotomist/intermediate-state reading? What would be required, exegetically or theologically, to sustain the soul sleep doctrine in the face of the positive testimony of Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, and 2 Corinthians 5:8?

- The lesson identifies the key Reformation arguments against purgatory: the completeness of justification (Romans 8:1), the immediacy of entrance into Christ's presence (Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8), the evaluative comparison (Philippians 1:23: "very much better" is incompatible with a state of suffering), and the binary of Hebrews 9:27. Which of these arguments do you find most exegetically decisive? Are there any New Testament texts that you think provide genuine support for a post-mortem purification, and how does the Reformed tradition account for them?
- The lesson distinguishes between the intermediate state (temporary, between death and resurrection) and the final state (permanent, after the resurrection and the last judgment). What specifically does this distinction imply for the pastoral care of the bereaved and the dying? Does the distinction between the intermediate state's genuine goodness and the final state's eschatological fullness affect the way you think about the relationship between the present Christian life and the intermediate state? How does the incompleteness of the intermediate state (the soul without the body, awaiting the resurrection) qualify the comfort that the doctrine provides?
- Luke 16's portrayal of the rich man in Hades describes a soul that is conscious, capable of suffering, capable of memory and concern for others, and capable of communication with those in the comforting state, and yet separated from them by an impassable divide. How does the specific character of this portrayal bear on questions of evangelism, pastoral care for the dying, and the urgency of the Christian mission? Does the consciousness of the unrighteous in the intermediate state function differently in the pastoral and evangelistic imagination than the consciousness of the righteous? How should it?
- The Westminster Shorter Catechism says the souls of believers are "made perfect in holiness" at death. How does this instantaneous perfection of holiness relate to the progressive sanctification that preceded death? Is the relationship one of continuity (the Spirit completes instantaneously what He was doing progressively) or of discontinuity (something qualitatively different happens at death)? And how does this instantaneous perfection of holiness bear on the rejection of purgatory, does it fully address the Catholic concern about the soul's fitness to enter the presence of the holy God?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the doctrine of the intermediate state is the theological foundation of the church's entire ministry to the dying and the bereaved. Evaluate the current practice of the congregation you serve in this light. What specific aspects of the ministry to the dying and the bereaved most adequately reflect the biblical doctrine of the intermediate state? What specific aspects most inadequately reflect it? What specific changes in pastoral practice, liturgical form, or theological formation would bring the congregation's ministry to the dying and the bereaved into better alignment with the doctrine?
- The lesson identifies the consciousness of the unrighteous in the intermediate state as generating the most urgent possible motivation for evangelism. Does this theological conviction actually function as a motivating reality in the evangelistic practice of the congregation you serve? If it does not, what is responsible for the disconnection between the theological conviction and the evangelistic practice? What specific formation, what specific pastoral leadership, what specific structural initiatives would most effectively connect the doctrine of the intermediate state for the unrighteous to a more urgent, more consistent, and more compassionate evangelistic engagement in the congregation's specific context?
- The dying thief received the promise of paradise from Jesus on the day of his death, with no prior religious formation, no sacramental preparation, and no years of discipleship. He received the promise in the moment of penitent faith. What does this specific promise teach about the nature of the hope that the church offers to those who come to faith late, under pressure, or in crisis? How does the pastoral care you offer to those who are dying reflect the accessibility and the sufficiency of the gospel that Jesus's promise to the thief embodies?
- Paul's comparison of the present embodied life with the intermediate state, "to live is Christ and to die is gain", describes a relationship to death that is neither the culture's denial (pretending death is not real or

not significant) nor the culture's despair (treating death as the final annihilation of the person). Does the community you serve inhabit this distinctively Christological relationship to death? What specific formation, in the preaching, in the teaching, in the liturgical practice, in the pastoral care, would most effectively cultivate this Christological relationship to death in the lives of the community's members, so that when death comes, in their own lives or in the lives of those they love, it comes to people who are prepared for it by the specific hope the gospel provides?

- This lesson is the final lesson of Unit 4 and the thirteenth lesson of twenty-six. At the midpoint of the Anthropology series, take stock of your own theological formation across the four units completed. What doctrinal conviction has been most deepened? What pastoral resource most enriched? What theological question most helpfully framed? And what anticipation do you carry into Unit 5, which turns from the constitution of human nature to the original state and the covenant of works, the beginning of the doctrine of sin and redemption? The remaining thirteen lessons will address the fall, original sin, human sexuality, the cultural mandate, the unity of the human race, and the transition into Hamartiology. What theological preparation do the first thirteen lessons provide for the thirteen that remain?

Prayer Focus

Open this thirteenth lesson of the Anthropology series, the capstone of Unit 4 and the midpoint of the series, with a reading of 1 Corinthians 15:51–58, the great apostolic doxology of the resurrection that closes Paul’s extended treatment of the resurrection of the dead. Read it as the theological destination toward which the intermediate state is moving: the “sleep” of the mortal body will be ended in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable; the mortal will be clothed with immortality; and then the cry will rise that this lesson has been building toward from its first paragraph: “O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? ... but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Read the passage not as a doctrinal exposition to be analyzed but as the hymn it is, the triumphant, doxological declaration of the One who conquered death and who, in conquering it, has rendered it the doorway to the life that death cannot touch. Let the doxology of the resurrection frame the lesson’s specific teaching about the intermediate state: the intermediate state is the “already” of the victory over death; the resurrection is the “not yet” of its fullest expression; and both are secured by the same Lord whose death and resurrection are the ground and the guarantee of every word of comfort this lesson has offered.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of the intermediate state to deepen the specific quality of worship that each person of the Trinity calls forth. Begin with the Father, who holds the souls of the faithful in the intermediate state in His sovereign and loving care, who receives the spirit of each believer at death as the One who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7), who is the Father of spirits (Hebrews 12:9), and whose presence constitutes the paradise into which the souls of the redeemed are welcomed. Move to the Son, who conquered the intermediate state by entering it, who descended into the realm of the dead in His own human spirit at His death (1 Peter 3:19; Luke 23:46) and rose on the third day in the body that had been laid in the grave, demonstrating that the sting of death has been removed for all who are in Him. Adore the Son who says to every dying believer what He said to the thief: “today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Conclude with the Spirit, who is even now the first installment of the resurrection, the down payment of the glory that is coming, whose presence in the believer is the guarantee of the resurrection of the mortal body (Romans 8:11) and whose work of sanctification is even now moving toward the perfect holiness that death will complete and the resurrection will glorify.

Pray together at the conclusion of Unit 4 and at the midpoint of the Anthropology series in three specific directions. First, for the pastoral confidence that the doctrine of the intermediate state provides: that every pastor, teacher, and elder in the community would hold the specific biblical convictions about the believer’s intermediate state, immediate, conscious, personal, Christological, perfect in holiness, and teleologically oriented toward the resurrection, with enough clarity and warmth that they can offer genuine theological comfort at every deathbed and every graveside, without reaching for inadequate platitudes or retreating into theological vagueness in the moments when the specific content of the hope matters most. Second, for the evangelistic urgency that the doctrine of the intermediate state for the unrighteous generates: pray that the knowledge of what faces every person who dies outside of Christ would produce in this community the same urgency, the same compassion, and the same gospel-saturated engagement with the people around it that characterized the apostles who proclaimed the gospel in the awareness that every human life is bounded by a death that will determine, in the absence of Christ, a condition of conscious suffering and separation from God that no gospel-proclaiming church can contemplate without the most urgent response. Third, for a holy preparation for death: pray that every member of this community would be genuinely, specifically, theologically prepared for the death that awaits her, holding the specific hope of the intermediate state, the specific confidence of full justification in Christ, and the specific eschatological longing for the resurrection that will make the intermediate state’s genuine goodness into the eschatological glory for which the whole creation groans.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 16:19–31; 23:43; Acts 7:59; John 5:24; 11:11–14; Philippians 1:19–26; 2 Corinthians 5:1–10; Hebrews 9:27; Romans 8:1; Revelation 6:9–11; 1 Corinthians 15:51–58

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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