

The Intermediate State

While the body decays upon physical death, the immaterial part of man continues to exist for all eternity. Next we will examine the intermediate state of man, or the period between his death or rapture and resurrection or final judgment.

Defective Views of the Intermediate State

1. Universalism

Universalists believe that all will sooner or later be saved. They usually have a low view of Scripture and argue more from God's nature of love than from Biblical evidence. Biblical evidence includes passages which express desire for all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; John 12:32; 2 Peter 3:9).

Of course many other verses show that because of man's rebellion, God's desire is unrealized (John 3:36; Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 4:3; Hebrews 2:3). In fact, it is the few and not the many that gain eternal life (Matthew 7:13-14).

2. Annihilationism

Annihilationism teaches that man is created immortal and fulfills his destiny in salvation, while the wicked cease to exist either by direct act of God or by the corrosive effect of evil.

Biblical passages used to defend this view speak to the death of the wicked (Romans 6:23; James 5:20; Revelation 20:14), destruction (Matthew 7:13; 10:28; 1 Thessalonians 1:9), and perishing (John 3:16). Other arguments say it is inconsistent with God's love to torment His creatures forever.

However, many other verses use the term "forever" or "everlasting" in regard to the punishment of the wicked (Isaiah 33:14; Jeremiah 17:4; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 18:8; 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Jude 6-7; Revelation 14:11; 19:3; 20:10). Also, expressions such as "fire unquenchable" (Isaiah 66:24; Matthew 3:12; Luke 3:17; Mark 9:43-45) speak to an eternal punishment and not a cessation of existence.

Spiritual death does not mean that the soul becomes a non-being, but that it is totally deprived of the presence of God, which is the essential condition of worthwhile existence (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9)

3. Conditional Immortality

Conditional immortality teaches that humans are naturally mortal and God imparts to the redeemed the gift of immortality, allowing the rest of humanity to cease to exist. The difference then between annihilationism and conditional immortality is that the first believes that all are created eternal and the unsaved will cease to exist and the latter believes that all are created temporal and the only the saved will be given eternal life.

In addition to the verses used by annihilationists, the primary biblical text for conditional immortality is 1 Timothy 6:16, which teaches that only God is immortal (and therefore humans are not). However, God has other attributes that are based upon Him alone that He has imparted to man, for example wisdom (Romans 16:27).

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Certainly the conditionalist believes that God gives immortality to the saved. There is no biblical evidence that God has created humans to exist temporarily. As demonstrated, there is abundant evidence that the redeemed will enjoy eternal life and the unredeemed will suffer eternal destruction.

4. Soul Sleep

"Soul sleep" is the idea that during the period between death and resurrection, the soul remains in a state of unconsciousness. This view was taught by many Anabaptists and Socinians in the sixteenth century. Today it is held by Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah Witnesses.

Furthermore, this view believes man is not body and soul but one entity. Therefore, when the body ceases to function, the soul does likewise. Nothing survives physical death and the entire person awaits resurrection

However, the Bible refers to a conscious existence between death and resurrection. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 and Jesus' words to the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43 appear to depict a definite awareness after death.

The case for soul sleep rests on the Scripture's frequent use of the word sleep to refer to death. However, sleep is often used to mean the cessation of life. The story of Jesus raising Lazarus in John clearly shows that sleep is a euphemism for death and is not intended to describe the future state of the soul.

5. Purgatory

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that only those who leave this life in a state of perfection go directly to heaven. Those who have died in a state of wickedness go directly to hell. There is also a large number who do not fall into these two groups and go to an intermediate holding place.

Under Catholicism there are two intermediate holding places:

a. Limbo

Limbo is for unbaptized infants. Because of original sin, which can only be removed by baptism, these infants cannot enter the presence of God. However, these infants only suffer punishment for original sin, not for actual sins committed.

In addition, there is a limbo for Old Testament believers. When Christ died, He descended into sheol and delivered these believers from their captivity and this limbo is now empty.

b. Purgatory

Purgatory, according to Catholic theologian Joseph Pohle is:

"a state of temporary punishment for those who, departing this life in the grace of God, are not entirely free from venial sins or have not yet fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions."

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The primary support for the doctrine of purgatory is 2 Maccabees 12:43-45 (an apocryphal book added to the Catholic Bible in the 16th century), which speaks of Judas Maccabaeus making atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin:

"He [Judas Maccabaeus] levied a contribution from each man, and sent the total of two thousand silver drachmas to Jerusalem for a sin-offering -- a fit and proper act in which he took due account of the resurrection. For if he had not been expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been foolish and superfluous to pray for the dead. But since he had in view the wonderful reward reserved for those who die a godly death, his purpose was a holy and pious one. And this was why he offered an atoning sacrifice to free the dead from their sin."

Also, Matthew 12:32 is cited, where Jesus says, "But whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."

However, 2 Maccabees is not accepted as Scripture by Protestants and was only accepted as canonical by the Roman Catholics in 1548. To base a doctrine on 2 Maccabees is highly questionable. Also, Matthew 12:32 does not teach that some sins will only be forgiven in the age to come. It only teaches that sin against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

Most importantly, the doctrine of purgatory implies a salvation by works. It is Christ's death alone that forgives and atones for sin. No amount of suffering on our part is required.

The Biblical View of the Intermediate State

1. The Intermediate State of the Unsaved

When the unsaved die, their immaterial nature goes to sheol (the Old Testament term) or hades (the Greek equivalent of sheol, used in the New Testament) to wait for the resurrection of the body at the end of the millennium.

The souls of the ungodly are outside the body in hades and the body is resurrected at the great white throne of judgment and will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15). This final state is known by the Greek word gehenna in the NT, the place of punishment assigned permanently at the last judgment, a place of eternal torment (Mark 9:43-48).

2. The Intermediate State of the Saved

There are indications that the righteous dead do not descend to hades (Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 2:31). Rather, the righteous are received into paradise (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43), very distinct from hades.

Paul equates being absent from the body with being present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Philippians 1:19-26). Since Christ was raised to be seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 1:20), believers can expect to enter His presence in heaven upon death.

The bodies of NT believers will be resurrected at the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16) while the bodies of OT believers will evidently be raised at the end of the great tribulation (Daniel 12:2; Revelation 20:4), and all will return to earth with Christ at the second coming.