

The Intermediate State

Topical Subjects - GIW

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Of my message today is the intermediate state and I'm preaching this sermon for several reasons. One reason is the fact that living in northwest Iowa, which has long been considered a kind of bastion of the Reformed faith, I was rather startled when I attended funeral services conducted there by orthodox ministries that no mention was made of the bodily resurrection, and as I listened to these sermons preached on those occasions, I felt grief because to me it sounded as if the intermediate state was being held up as the ultimate hope of the Christian believer. And that is not the case. If I ask you what is your only comfort in life and death, what are you going to tell me? Are you going to tell me that your only hope in life and in death is that when you die your spirit will go and be with Christ? Is that all you have to say? If it is, then I feel sorry for you because you have not gone much beyond the ancient Greeks to whom Paul preached on Mars hill. The classic answer to that question is, what is my comfort? My comfort is that I, with body and soul both in life and death, am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior. And the Shorter Catechism asks the question about what happens to believers when they die and it also sets forth the classic Christian faith in the clearest possible way. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death? Well, says the Catechism, their souls at their death are made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory. But it doesn't stop there, it goes on to say and their bodies being still united to Christ rest in their graves till the resurrection, and at the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, will be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God through all eternity. So you see, the ancient Apostles' Creed was right when it did not talk about the intermediate state but about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Having had that experience, I was invited to preach at the new Orthodox Reformed Church in Sanborn, IA, and I chose to preach on the bodily resurrection, pointing out to the people that they need to develop discernment and ask themselves always, "Am I really hearing the real Christian hope in this message?" And I tried to give it to them that day and it was well accepted but some of the older people came to me afterward and said, "Well, you mentioned the intermediate state and you said that was not the ultimate hope, but nevertheless we're interested also in the intermediate state. Would you please preach on that subject?" So I did. And as one who is approaching the time when I will be in the intermediate state myself, I have a considerable interest in the subject anyway. And when

I thought of some of you older dear saints here in Carson, I thought I could share with you that wonderful comfort. Always remember, however, that the intermediate state, though it is a comfort, it is not the ultimate comfort.

When I was a boy, we used to go out to grandpa's house in Nebraska and they always had Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs, and they were full of good, better and best. Any of you remember that? You could get the cheap one, and that was good. You could get the middle one, and that was better. Or you could really fork out some dollars and you could get the best. Well, friends, what we have already is good, the intermediate state is better but it ain't the best. The best comes when we actually experience the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

So I'm not talking today about a place, there is no intermediate place. Christ in his parable made that clear. The rich man and Lazarus, one went to heaven, the other went to hell. There is no intermediate place halfway between heaven and hell but there is an intermediate state. The intermediate state should never be our ultimate focus. The ultimate focus is the final state in which we are like Jesus when we see him as he is, for the hour is coming, said Jesus, when all that are in their grave shall hear his voice and come forth, they that have done good to the resurrection of life and some to the resurrection of damnation. So we need to understand what the intermediate state is. It is that state of existence which is not the same as it is now and not the same as it ultimately will be.

Today, I stand before you as a sinner with a partly sanctified soul still dwelling in an Adamic body. A sin decayed and corrupted body which is going to die. Someday, if Christ sees in me the faith that I believe is there, I will stand before him looking like Jesus himself for we will be like him [unintelligible]. In between that, my body will lie in the grave and my spirit will return to God who gave it and will remain in that state until the hour of his glorious return.

Now I don't think there's any question at all about the proper interpretation of the passage I read from 2 Corinthians 5 whence the apostle speaks of "our earthly house," and when he calls it this tent, he is using classic biblical language to describe the physical body of man in its frailty and impermanence. You may remember that Amos the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said, "King Hezekiah, put your house in order for you will die. You will become sick and you will not recover." Well, Hezekiah was a believer and he trembled at the word of a prophet, and this is what he said he did, "I said in the prime of my life, must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years? I said I will not again see the Lord in the land of the living, like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me." There was nothing in the ancient culture so much like the body of a man as it dies as a tent. You live in a tent, and then the day comes when you can't put it up anymore, it's too corrupt and decrepit and it falls down and collapses and that's it, you can't use it anymore. And it's like that with the physical body. Job says, "Are not the cords of their tent pulled up so that they die?"

You see, it's a familiar biblical figure for the frailty of the sin-destroyed body of Adam and his descendants, and so you and I, as sure as we sit here today or stand here today, unless Christ returns first, we'll have to fold up our tent and the spirit will return to God who gave it. And by the way, the Greek term translated in that passage as "destroyed" does not mean a blasted out of existence. It does not mean obliterated so that there is no body. It simply means that it collapses and is not usable in that form anymore, and that precisely describes the intermediate state.

Having said that, the apostle goes on to say we have a building from God, however, an eternal house in heaven not built by human hands, and the question is: what does that mean? Do you really understand what he says in that text? And when are we going to have this building from God, an eternal house in heaven not built by human hand? It is my humble opinion that it is right there that the confusion exists in the minds of many real Christians because they seem to think that when their soul flies away to the Lord, they will receive a heavenly body.

I was a minister in Mangere, New Zealand many years ago when a dear widow and her two children came over to New Zealand from Australia. They came over there because they were starved to death for biblical preaching in Australia and they wanted to hear the gospel, and they thought they would find it in a reviving Presbyterian Church but they didn't find it. So as a last resort, they came to our church to listen to my preaching and I had quite an interest in that lady and her children and when I heard that she was going to have heart surgery, I went to visit her to comfort her and to pray for her full recovery, and as I offered to pray for her full recovery, I was startled beyond words when she remarked, "Well, Pastor," she said, "one of these days I'll be through with this body forever, so it really doesn't make much difference." Well, I thought that's a brave thing to say, and I'm sure you mean to communicate to me your confidence or something, but my oh, my, what a misunderstanding of the Christian faith. And so I instructed her and I invited her to read Calvin's Institutes about the resurrection. I'm happy to say that she was a very teachable lady and she thanked me most profusely for having taken away that area of straight-out unbelief in her mind and thinking. But it illustrates the impact of the thinking of the age in which we live that she could have ever thought that way in the Christian church.

So our fathers understood this passage to mean this: if we are appointed to die before Christ's return, then we will live in the intermediate state as souls without body. And it is my conviction that that is the only view that is really in line with the rest of the Bible. There is no passage in the Bible that ever says anything about a temporary heavenly body. There is nothing in the word of God to ever suggest that you will ever have a second body as to its specific identity. No, the Bible says this mortal must put on immortality. This corruption must put on incorruption. It is this selfsame body, as our historic Confession says, that will be raised again from the dead at the glorious return of Christ.

And that's why the Apostle Paul says we groan. Why does he say we groan? Didn't he just tell us to depart from the body is to be with Christ? Yes, he did. Didn't he just tell us that to depart and to be with the Lord is far better than what we now know? Yes, he did.

Well, what's he groaning for then? I'll tell you why he's growing, he's groaning because he dreads the intermediate state in one of its aspects. And what is that aspect? It is being naked. Unclothed. I do not relish the idea of being a naked spirit, do you? I do not find that altogether attractive. I find the idea of being resurrected and glorified so that my spirit and body are both sinless and like Christ himself, I find that most attractive, but I don't find it altogether attractive to be a naked spirit. And here's what he says, we groan and are burdened because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. If you're alive on the earth when Christ returns, that'll happen in the twinkling of an eye, and you won't ever have to be naked. That's the one great benefit of living in the last generation in history. I really don't think I'm going to make it to that point in history. And like Paul, I'm groaning a little at this idea that I've got to be in the intermediate state for a while though he says it's better. What we've got now is good, that's better, but it isn't the best. And so Paul was groaning because of the conflicting emotions about these two assets. In one way, it's far better, and the reason is because then he'll be with Jesus.

Now, of course, there is a sense, brothers and sisters in which Christ is with us. Isn't that true? Didn't he say to his apostles, "Behold, I am with you always even to the end of the age"? Didn't Paul say, "I've been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me"? Galatians 2:20. Didn't he say to the Ephesians, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith"? Oh yes, we do have fellowship with Christ. He is with us. He is with us always but at this time in the history of mankind, he is only with us through the operation of his Holy Spirit. As far as his bodily presence is concerned, he is away from here. That's why you have to depart from the body to be with the Lord.

You can't be with the Lord where he is in his human nature, and that includes his human body, while you're here on this earth in your flesh. That's why we reject that heretical hymn, "I went to the garden alone while the dew was still on the roses." That is not true for anybody on the face of the earth today, because you can go out in the garden all you like and look at the dew on the roses, but Jesus is not there bodily as he once was with his disciple. You've got to face that and be done with this phony mysticism that often pervades Christian circles today. We live in a time of much false mysticism, but ours is an historic faith and we refuse to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. The only real Christ is the Jesus of history and he told us that he was going away to prepare a place for us, and when he gets it all prepared, then he will come and receive his own.

So Jesus is absent from the earth; in his personal, physical, human nature, he is absent. The disciples when they saw him during that 40 days, they could look at his scars, they could touch him. He says, "Feel me for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And then on the 40th day, he ascended into heaven in every bit as much a literal sense as our astronauts go up into the blue yonder. And that's why the Bible says we walk by faith, not by sight. Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. You've never seen Jesus, and the things we're talking about

are only in the realm of hope for you, like the difference between you and me when it comes to Auckland, New Zealand. I know there is an Auckland, New Zealand because I used to live there. I've been there several times. I went back a couple of years ago for our church as a fraternal delegate, and it's still there. You believe it's there, but I know it's there because I've seen it. Well, the apostles knew Christ after the flesh, but nobody knows him that way yet in the rest of history until he comes again, and that's the thing that makes the intermediate state better. To depart from the body is to be with the Lord where he is in his glorified human nature, our wonderful Savior. To be absent from this house is to be present with the Lord, but it's not the best. The best is when he returns and our bodies are made like unto the glorious body of Christ so that we can have human fellowship with him forever in both body and soul. That's why all the great Catechisms, they do not talk about the spirit flying away to heaven as the final hope of the Christian. That is not the final hope of the Christian, anything but the final hope of the Christian.

I draw your attention then to certain very important principles that we need to learn from this part of the Bible, the first of which is and we need to really emphasize this today. Not so long ago I wrote an article [unintelligible]. I entitled it "Resurrecting the Resurrection" because so many preachers don't even mention it anymore, and that's wrong. Paul says it is God who made us for this very purpose. For what purpose? To live as glorified human beings like Jesus. That's what God made us for. He didn't make us so we could fly around like invisible angels do because they are only spirit. He made us men so that in body and spirit we might glorify the Lord.

So when people think of this as their ultimate comfort, that John died and now his spirit has gone to be forever with the Lord, that's not Christianity, certainly not the fullness of Christianity. That's Greek thought in modern dress. So we need to keep our focus on exactly what we confessed a few moments ago, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, for this mortal body will put on immortality, this corruption will put on incorruption." It'll be like putting on a new suit, and when that new suit puts itself upon us, the old will be taken into it and transformed and the old will not be cast away and forgotten, the old will be renewed. And God has assured us of this by giving us a down payment. Listen, God made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a down payment guaranteeing what is to come.

Now if you take the Bible seriously and you are a believer today, you have to reckon with the fact that you were dead in trespasses and sins every last one of you. Dead. Totally unable to do anything to save yourself, under the total dominion and authority of the prince of the kingdom of darkness. And then what happened? One day of God's choosing, his Holy Spirit invaded your spirit and quickened you, and the word "quickened" in the Bible mean "made you alive." Up till that moment you were dead. Suddenly in the twinkling of an eye, you were alive and for the first time you began to hear the gospel, and it penetrated your heart and it moved you and it brought you to tears of repentance and the outreach of the helpless hand of the sinner to God in faith. And the Bible says it took the same almighty power of God for that to happen as it took to raise Jesus out of his grave on the third day. That's why it is called the first resurrection. That's why John says we know that we already have passed from death unto life because the plan of God is

such that the aspect of man that we call the spirit, the soul, the mind, that is resurrected here and now in this life, in this world. The body is not resurrected one by one through history as God takes his elect out of the family of men. The bodily resurrection comes all at once at the Second Coming of Christ, and that is the second resurrection and blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection because he certainly will never see the second death.

And it is because we have this if we're genuine Christians, am I the same person that I was 50 years ago? Yes, in a sense I am. You say, "GI, did you really do that before you were a Christian?" I say, "Yes, I did it. I did it." "Are you the same person that did that?" And I'll have to say, "Well, in a way I am, in a way I'm not. I'm a new creature in Christ. The things I once hated and ridiculed," and I really did ridicule the straight people, "I now love and the people I once thought I loved I now do not love. Yes, I'm a totally different person and yet I'm also the same person." Well, there you have the one analogy to your body. Will that body that is raised and made a heavenly and eternal body for God's people, will it be the same body? Our Confession says, yes, the selfsame body in identity but gloriously changed in quality. And what the apostle is saying is, if you've got the one, then you have no reason to doubt the other. If God has given you that tremendous down payment, you should never have the slightest doubt that he will do what he has said on that glorious day.

And that brings me back to that marvelous statement in Philippians where Paul says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Now that ought to make you realize that you can't say to die is gain unless you can say for me to live is Christ. You can't go out of this life with any real comfort and hope that has any substance to it unless you already have part in the first resurrection, the down payment that God gives his people. You can't separate the one from the other. So let me just ask you that simple question: do you have it? When you get up in the morning, do you say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. And I know to die is gain because for me to live is Christ."

If you get up in the morning without any thought of such things, I would have considerable concern about you. How can somebody who was dead be made alive and ever stop rejoicing? How can you ever get up in the morning without, even if you don't know how to sing and some of you don't probably but do the next thing to it, make a joyful noise to the Lord. How can you get up without feeling the awesome wonder of the fact that you are a Christian.? If you've lost that, you're a stranger to the historic Christian faith because that is the first resurrection. But if you do get up with that in your heart, I know it's not there perfectly in me and it isn't perfectly in you either, but if you do get up in the morning rejoicing that you are a believing Christian and that God has given you that down payment, what a wonderful thing because good as it is, the next thing in line is better and after that comes the best when on the last day not only I'm reading from the Heidelberg Catechism, not only my soul after this life shall immediately be taken up to Christ as head, but also that this my body raised by the power of Christ will again be united with my soul and made like unto the glorious body of Christ. And that marvelous Catechism goes on to say, well, what makes you so sure? And the answer is because I now, I take that to mean I already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy and that

enables me to know that after this life I shall possess perfect bliss therein to praise God forever. You older folks will soon be there. I hope you live every day in confident expectation of both the better and the best. Amen.

Father in heaven, oh, how we need the comfort that you alone can give. We all face the dark tomb and we don't like that. We also face the thought of being unclothed spirits and, Lord, we are sinners, we have violated your holy will but, O God, you revive again and again in our hearts that confident hope, that overcoming joy because you have already brought us from death unto life and you will bring us to that which is the best of all. We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.