

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Final Things Lesson 5: “The Church and the Intermediate State”

We are in the midst of a series called “Final Things.” So far, in the last four chapters of Revelation, we have covered 1) the second coming, 2) the millennium, 3) the eternal state, and 4) the New Jerusalem. Today we wind the clock back in time and discuss two present realities: 5) the church age and the intermediate state.



If either of those terms are unfamiliar to you, they won't be by the time that we are done today.

Today, we are going to examine a number of different passages from the Bible. So keep your Bible ready at your side. We'll look at a few different places in the NT.

But let's start where we left off last time in **Revelation**. And let's close the loop on the ending of this great book. We left off last time in **Revelation 22:5**. And so far, we've seen the New Jerusalem. We've seen the new heavens and new earth. We've seen the eternal state of believers and unbelievers (i.e., the lake of fire). All of this takes place after Jesus's return, after the millennium, and after the final judgment. John shows us how it's all going to end. And he shows us where we will be for ten thousand years and then forevermore.

Revelation 22:5 even ends with a statement: “forever and ever.” **Sounds like Handel's Messiah.** And you might think to yourself, “That's a great place to close out this book.”

But wait, there's more. John has some final comments at the end of the book that describe a different era. He says in **Revelation 22:6**:

⁶ And he said to me,

That's the angel speaking to John who has revealed all these awesome things about eternity including the New Jerusalem where we will live forever.

The angel says,

“These words are trustworthy and true.

Someone might say, “**The book of Revelation is just a bunch of confusing signs and symbols that no one can understand.**” No, these words are trustworthy and true. I'll admit that the book of **Revelation** is a difficult book, but it's not unintelligible. I hope you've seen in the past few lessons, that we can make sense of this book. These words are trustworthy and true, and there is even a blessing that accompanies the person who heeds these words.

And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”⁷ “And behold, I am coming soon.

“**When? When, Jesus? I've got to know.**” Well you're not going to know when. Jesus says concerning the day and the hour of his return, “no one knows” (**Matt 24:36**). **So if someone ever tells you that they know their exact time of Christ's return, you can happily dismiss that person as a crackpot.**

... behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

Look at **verse 8**.

⁸ I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, ⁹ but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

John's made that mistake a couple times in this book. Come on, John! Get it together! But this actually becomes a great object lesson for us twice in this book. **Don't worship or bow down to anything or anyone other than God. And don't let anyone else bow down to you.**

Look at **verse 10**.

¹⁰ And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.

What Jesus is describing here is what's called the imminence of Christ's return... "Imminence" meaning nearness and suddenness. What Christ is saying here is that his *coming* for us could happen at any moment. And when it happens, it'll happen quickly without warning. This is something that Christians have believed from the very beginning of the church, namely that Jesus's return could happen at any moment. A thousand years are like a day for the Lord (**2 Pet 3:8**).

So when Christ says "I am coming soon," that could mean 5 years, 10 years, 100 years, or 2000 years. His appearing can happen at any moment, and so that's why we need to be ready. Look at **verse 11**.

¹¹ Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

In other words, evil will be present all the way to the end. Don't be surprised by that.

¹² "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. ¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Jesus says, **"I am coming soon, and I'm not coming as a babe born in a manger. That's done. I'm coming this time as Alpha/Omega. I'm coming as the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I'm coming with all the adornments and the accoutrements of a Sovereign, Almighty Deity."**

¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. ¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

You might have thought, "all dogs go to heaven." Nope, it's the opposite. Actually this reference to dogs is a reference to unregenerate unbelievers. Dogs were more like curs and mongrels in the first century world than domesticated pets. **They weren't "man's best friend."**

So these "dogs" (**Rev 22:15** – "unrepentant unbelievers") **don't go to heaven.**

¹⁶ "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches.

Notice the time reference here. This is "for the churches." **Log that away. I'll come back to that.**

I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."

¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

The Spirit and the Bride, the church, are testifying concerning Christ. This is evangelism. This is the great commission given to the church. **"Come and get saved. Because final things are coming."**

Look at **verse 18**.

¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

In other words, don't add to this book! Don't take away from it! Don't you dare do that! **Don't you dare "Joseph Smith" this book or anything recorded in the Scriptures. Don't you dare "Mormonize" or "Islamize" this book or anything recorded in the Scriptures. Message received, Lord. We will not. And we will not listen to those who do.**

Look at **verse 20**.

²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! ²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Thus ends the words of the Holy Bible.

Now, John alludes to the second coming and the New Jerusalem in this final section of Scripture. Jesus even alludes to his coming in **22:12**, he says, **"I am coming soon."** That's either the angel speaking

on behalf of Jesus, or Jesus took over the speaking role for the angel at the end. But the primary time reference in this section is not the eternal hereafter. It's the now of John's day. It's the people that John is writing to in his day. It's the church.

And that church includes *us*. To be precise, John wrote to the early church in the first century. John was the last of the apostles still alive. This is the last of the 66 books of Scripture written and inspired by the Holy Spirit. And John's *original* audience was the early church, much of whom were suffering greatly under the yoke of the Roman Empire.

That church, John's original audience, began at Pentecost (see Acts 2). And it continues today two-thousand years later. And it will continue until the church is raptured and taken home to glory.

And we as the church are just one slice, one segment of God's longer and broader plan of redemption. In other words, the world doesn't begin or end with the church age (although the church does go on into eternity).

It's kind of like world history in that way. I know we as Americans like to think that world history began in 1776. I appreciate that notion as an American. But that's just not the case.

Even American history dates back farther than that. You've got to explore the movements of European nations that led to the settlement of the American colonies in the 1600s and 1700s. And you can go back even farther than that to explore the Greek and Roman empires and their philosophers and leaders who influenced greatly our founding fathers, our constitution, and our rule of law.

We don't have time for that tonight. All I want to say is that world history didn't begin in 1776. And God's plan of redemption in our world didn't begin or end with the church. We are a part of God's greater plan.

So, with that introduction, here's where we're going today. I want to give you three statements from Scripture concerning the Church Age which we live in. And then I'll give you three additional statements about "the intermediate state." Not the eternal state! The intermediate state!

Where do believers go when they die? They don't go to pearly gates and streets of gold in the New Jerusalem. That's coming later in the New Jerusalem. They don't even get new bodies yet when they die. That's later at Christ's return. So what's happens to them now? We'll look at that too before we are done. And we'll talk briefly as well about how we as Christians deal with death in this world.

Let's get started. Write this down as #1 in your notes concerning the church age.

1) The church age is the **sixth** of seven **dispensations**

There are two great epochs in human history. There is Old Testament and New Testament. There is B.C. and A.D. But beyond that simplicity, there are seven different dispensations in human history. These are seven distinct periods of time in human history where God is interacting with humankind.

Several weeks ago, I told you that I am a pretribulational, premillennial, dispensationalist. We've dealt with the premillennial issue. Now we get to discuss dispensationalism.

And here are those seven dispensations:¹

1) The Age of Innocence (Gen 1–3) – Obviously, that's Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, before the fall.

2) The Age of Conscience (Gen 3–8) – This is when man's conscience was awakened after the fall. And God dealt with man through his conscience prior to the law in light of what happened in the garden.

3) The Age of Government (Gen 9–11) – This involves features of the Noahic covenant: animals' fear of man, promise of no more floods, and protection of human life through the institution of capital punishment and human government that God has delegated to.

¹ Taken and slight adjusted from Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, ed. Jim Vincent and Allan Sholes, Revised and Expanded (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 560. See chapter 36 (pages 553–70) for this schema and other iterations of dispensations.

4) The Age of Patriarchs/Promise (Gen 12–Exod 19) – This covers the period of the patriarchs, in which God ordained that they should respond by faith to His revelation to them. This is before the Law. This is before Moses went up Mt. Sinai.

5) The Age of Mosaic Law (Exod 19–Acts 1) – The law was given at Sinai. The law was in force until the resurrection of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit. And those canonized Scriptures that Moses wrote were authoritative all the way to Pentecost.

6) The Church Age (Acts 2–Rev 19) – This is sometimes called The Age of Grace. But I prefer the Church Age, because grace is part of every age. Paul Enns writes, “Although grace is evident in every age, it is uniquely so in the coming of Christ. Through the advent of Christ God made His grace known to all mankind.”

7) The Age of Kingdom (Rev 20ff.) – This involves the Millennial kingdom and beyond.²

And so, here’s the question for us—where are we in that chronology? Where is the church? We are sixth of seven. We are in the church age right now. And we have been for 2,000 years.

An even simpler chronology can be established when you think about God’s working with his people Israel. God made specific promises to Abraham and others in the OT. God’s people still have promises awaiting future fulfillment in the millennial kingdom.

And so, some have spoken of the church age as a parenthesis in God’s working with Israel. For a period of 2,000+ plus years, God is working with his church to graft in believers, like limbs grafted on a tree (see **Rom 11:11–24**). And at the same time, he is making Israel jealous (**Rom 11:11, 14; Deut 32:21**). So that at the removal of the church, in the time of tribulation, he will redirect his attention to the nation of Israel, and Israel will turn ultimately to Christ (**Rom 11:25–27**). Right now, we are living now in that parenthesis.

Here’s a second statement regarding the church age.

2) The church age began at **Pentecost**

We don’t call OT Israelites, the church. And we don’t call the NT church, Israel. They are both collectively part of the people of God, or more generally “believers.” But in dispensational theology (love our brothers who disagree with us on this issue), the Lord distinguishes between the church and Israel. And I think that’s a helpful distinction for interpretation.

If you remember from the book of **Acts**, Jesus ascends, and tells his disciples to wait for the outpouring of the Spirit. That happened at Pentecost. And it happened among Jews like Paul and the first disciples. But those Jews were tasked with the important duty of becoming witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth. And that’s the story of **Acts**. It’s the story of how the “church universal” spread to those regions and incorporated Jews, Judeans, Samaritans, and Gentiles.

And that work continues until today. We have more in common with those believers in the NT book of **Acts** than we do with OT Israelites. Because we operate in the same age as them, the church age.

Here’s a third statement regarding the church age.

3) The Church Age ends at the **rapture**

We’ll talk more about this next week, and I don’t want to steal next week’s thunder. But at the risk of that, turn with me to **1 Thessalonians 4**.

This is so important. Paul says there the following in **verse 15**:

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

Interestingly the church in Thessalonica wasn’t worried about being alive when Jesus comes for them. They must have been told by Paul that they will be raptured. The language used here in **verse 17** is “caught up” or “translated.” The Greek word is ἀρπάζω (*harpazō*) means “seized” or “grabbed” or “taken away” even

² Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 560: “It should be noted that features from one dispensation may be incorporated into subsequent dispensations; thus, elements from the periods *conscience*, *government*, and *promise* continue on in subsequent dispensations.”

forcefully, like a thief who steals loot in the night. Jesus said he will come like a “thief in the night” (**Rev 16:15, Matt 24:43, 1 Thess 5:2**).

These Thessalonian believers knew that when Christ came for them, they would immediately lose their old bodies and receive new bodies. But they were more worried about those who had died or fallen asleep already. They were mortified at the idea that those who died already would miss out on Christ’s return.

Paul says, **“Don’t you worry, my Thessalonian friends! Those who died before you will precede you who are still alive by mere milliseconds. And you will meet them in the clouds, in the air.”** And the Thessalonian believers breathed a sigh of relief when they heard this.

And just to be clear, the rapture signals the end of the church age. It’s not the end of the church. The church goes right on into eternity. We are the bride of Christ as we’ve seen already in **Revelation**. We come back with Christ to establish to this world to establish the millennial kingdom (**Rev 19:11–21**). The marriage supper of the Lamb takes place in eternity and last forever.

But the “church age” ends at the rapture. This is when the church will be removed from the world and God will redirect his attention towards Israel during the time of tribulation and then also the millennium.

Flip with me over to **2 Thessalonians 2**. It’s there that Paul says to the same church a few months later... look at **verse 6**.

⁶ *And you know what is restraining him now*

The “him” there is a reference to the man of lawlessness or the antichrist who is called to do Satan’s bidding. The restrainer is holding back the full manifestation of Satan’s end-times agenda.

⁶ *And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.* ⁷ *For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.*

This is a bit cryptic, but I believe that the “restrainer” here is the Holy Spirit, and his activity in the life of the church. We see that implemented at Pentecost. In the future, that’ll be removed. That restrainer will be restrained.

I think this is a reference to the rapture and the removal of the church in our world. And once the church is removed at the rapture, Satan and antichrist will get busy spreading lawlessness in the world, unimpeded by the Holy Spirit’s influence through the church.

If you want more on this, you can see my sermon series on **1 Thessalonians** and **2 Thessalonians** at Messiahbible.org. But just to summarize, the church age begins at Pentecost. And it ends at the rapture. **If you hold to a posttribulation rapture or a midtribulation rapture, then that’s where you pinpoint the end of the church age. I told you already that I’m a pretribulationist, so I see the rapture and the end of the church age taking place at the start of the tribulation, thus pretrib. Again, God brings the church home, and redirects his attention to Israel.**

Who’s right on that issue? Pretribbers? Midtribbers? Posttribbers? I think I am, but I don’t know. We’ll find out soon enough.

Now here’s the question that lingers, even after this discussion about the church age. Still people will ask, understandably... inquiring minds want to know... what happens to believers after they die? If they don’t go to the New Jerusalem yet... if they don’t receive resurrection bodies until the rapture... where are they now? What are they now? And what are they doing right now? Are they floating around in the netherworld? Are they angels? Are they asleep in the ground waiting to be awakened?

Also what about unbelievers who have died?

Let’s explore that. Let me give you...

Three Facts About the Intermediate State:

And let me say this about this matter. There is less explicit information about this than there is about the eternal state. We have all this content about the new heaven and the new earth and the New Jerusalem in **Revelation 20–22**. We even have a ton of content on Jesus’s millennial kingdom in the OT. But we have less on this issue—the intermediate state.

But we don't have nothing! We do have some statements in the Bible. Let me give you a few statements from Scripture. **Here's #1.**

1) When believers "fall asleep," they go **home** to be with the Lord

Turn with me to **2 Corinthians 5**. Paul says in **verse 1**.

¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

This is not a reference to the new heavens and the new earth or the New Jerusalem. This is a reference to what we have now in God's presence. Whatever heaven is now, it's not just a mystical place. **It's not just a state of mind.** It's a real place with real structure... Paul calls it a "building." And all of our friends and family who have died before us are there...including the Apostle Paul! It's a metaphysical reality, I get that, but it still has time and space associated with it.

Look at **verse 2**.

² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may **not** be found naked.

In other words, if we be found *without* faith in Christ. In that case, we have no heavenly home.

⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

Yes, we long for that time. We long for the time when death and these mortal bodies are no longer hanging over us.

⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord,

Now we need to qualify that statement a bit. The Lord said that he will be always with us and never forsake us (**Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5**). So how are we *away* from him? The answer is that his literal body is away from us in the current heaven (i.e., the intermediate heaven), while we are in earth.

Jesus Christ is embodied forever as a human. He is the God-man forever. He sits in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. And so, in that way, he is away from us. We're on earth. He's in heaven. But he has given us his Spirit to be with us always. We see that statement in **2 Corinthians 5:5**. He's given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

And here's the point that Paul is making. Look again at **verse 6**.

⁶ ... We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

To be dead as a Christian, to "fall asleep" as Paul says it in **1 Thessalonians**, is to be with the Lord. It's to be *at home* with the Lord. And Paul says that's better. We'd rather be there.

⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

That reference to judgment, by the way, is a reference to the "Bema Seat Judgment" that believers will go through. It's not the "White Throne Judgment" for unbelievers (**Rev 20:11–14**). We won't be part of that. We'll be judged well before that. Everything that we have ever done or said will be laid out before us and we will be rewarded (not punished or purged... this isn't purgatory... there's no such thing as purgatory). And we will receive our eternal rewards at that time.

But back to the intermediate state. Paul makes clear here that to be away from the body is to be present with the Lord. Whatever death is and whatever that looks like in heaven, we will be in the Lord's presence. **And as far as I'm concerned, that's enough. That's all we need to know.**

Christian believers, as soon as they draw their last breath, are whisked away into the presence of God after they die. In fact, they are more particularly whisked away into the presence of Christ. The reference to the Lord in 2 Corinthians 5 is a reference to Christ. Paul says in Philippians 1:23, "I am hard pressed between the two [i.e., life and death]. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Amen! Jesus told the criminal crucified next to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Also the martyred Stephen in the book of Acts said as he died, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God” (7:56). Then when he was dying, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59). Immediately after Stephen’s death, he (2 Cor 5:8) entered the presence of the Lord.

The Bible says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” (Rev 14:13). The Bible says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Ps. 116:15).³ **For the Christian believer, death is not finality, and neither is it terror-inducing uncertainty. Death is passage to a better reality. We go home to be with the Lord.**

Now let’s go back to 1 Thessalonians for a second. In 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Paul writes,

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.

Notice here that Paul says that Jesus died, but Christians just fall asleep. That word for “asleep” is the Greek word κοιμάω. We actually derive our English word “cemetery” from this Greek Word, κοιμάω. A *koimētērion* was a sleeping place.

“Those who have fallen asleep” is a euphemism for death,⁴ but it also conveys a waiting period for resurrection. That’s why historically Christians and Jews didn’t burn dead bodies or float corpses down a river. They buried them. They buried them in hope of the coming resurrection.

Notice too that Paul doesn’t refer to Jesus’s death as sleep in verse 14.

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died

Why “fallen asleep” for Christians who die, but “died” for Jesus? Didn’t Jesus just fall asleep too? Actually no. Probably Paul differentiates because unlike us Jesus actually endured separation from God at his death. He cried out “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani” (Mark 15:34). **Jesus endured actual separation from God at death, so that when we die, we don’t have to. We just go to sleep in Jesus.**

Donald Grey Barnhouse, the great Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, was trying to explain this to his kids after their mother had died. And of course, the kids were distraught and grief-stricken over their mother’s death. And their father, Dr. Barnhouse was trying to help them, and trying to help them process their grief in the light of the gospel.

And at one point, he looked up, and he said to them,

“Do you see that truck?”

“Yes.”

“Do you see the shadow of that truck?”

“Yes.”

“Would you rather be hit by the truck or by the shadow?”

The youngest kid said, “By the shadow.”

Barnhouse said, “Because Jesus was hit by the truck of death, your mother only had to go through the shadow of it.”⁵

Those of you who are savvy Bible readers will recognize the reference to Psalm 23 in that story. Jesus was hit by the truck of death so that we only have to go through the shadow of it.

Again, remember the context. These Thessalonians were terrified about death. They thought that those Christians who died would miss Christ’s return and their bodily resurrection.

And it’s understandable why they were confused. Paul had been chased out of Thessalonica before he was able to relay to them all the essentials about life, death, and the afterlife. And so, Paul reassures them here, **“Those who die in Christ will be just fine. Relax! They will fall asleep in Christ. They will go home to be with the Lord. And they will await their future resurrection bodies just like you are awaiting your future resurrection bodies.”**

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2004), 815.

⁴ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 167: “Terms for sleep were widely used in Antiquity as euphemisms for death both in Greek writings from earliest times (cf. Homer, *Il.* 11.241; Sophocles, *El.* 509) and in Jewish and Christian writings (see Gn. 47:30; Dt. 31:16; 1 Ki. 2:10; Job 14:12f.; Ps. 13:3; Je. 51:39f.; 2 Macc. 12:45; Jn. 11:11-13; Acts 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30).”

⁵ Quoted in Keller, Sermon: “Death and Christian Hope.” Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, March 15, 2009: <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/death-and-christian-hope-5319/>

Here's a second fact about the intermediate state.

2) Believers who die, live in a **disembodied** state, awaiting resurrection

Now, I'm going to put an asterisk on this second point, because again, there is some mystery regarding this. And God doesn't give us a lot of explicit detail concerning the intermediate state. Some theologians do think that we'll have some kind of body in this state. In other words, when we get to heaven we'll have temporary bodies again. They would have to be temporary, because according to **1 Thessalonians 4**, the resurrection bodies of believers in heaven and on earth are still to come.

Turn with me to **1 Corinthians 15**. Let's learn more about these resurrection bodies to come. We can't cover this whole chapter, which is fantastic by the way. But let's hit the highlights. Look at **verse 20**.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

This is the famous "Christ as firstfruits" statement in the Bible. **If you know anything about farming, you know that the firstfruits, the first ripened fruit of the harvest season is a sign of what everything else will look like.** That's Jesus's resurrection for us. His resurrection body is like what our future resurrection body will be. So Jesus walking around and talking with his disciples after the resurrection, eating fish, and looking similar to what he looked like in his previous body, that'll be us.

What Paul is doing in this passage is twofold. **1)** He's defending Christ's resurrection. Some people must have been skeptical about that. That's not surprising in the Roman context of the Corinthians. Paul even goes so far as to say that if Christ wasn't raised from the dead then our faith is meaningless. You might as well eat, drink, and be merry in this life, because there's nothing after death.

So Paul is defending Christ's resurrection. **2)** But Paul is also defending *our* future resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits of *our own* resurrection.

Let's skip down to **verse 35**.

³⁵ But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" ³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷ And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

Yes, we have to die. And that's unfortunate, but necessary. Like a kernel of grain, we are buried in the ground. The good news is, though, that after death, death can no longer hold us down. We are raised to immortality. **Born once; die twice. Born twice; die once.**

Skip down to **verse 42**. Let's keep going.

⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Skip down to **verse 50**.

⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Paul is mocking death with these last two statements! **This is the closest thing to "nanny-nanny-boo-boo" in the Bible that you'll find!**

Now here's where we need a little bit of clarity here. Turn back with me to **1 Thessalonians 4** and let's put these passages together. The question is the following—when will this happen? When will we receive these resurrection bodies? When we die? Or at the rapture?

Again, Paul says this in **1 Thessalonians 4:15**.

¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

So let's put this altogether—1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4. **When you die, you will be with the Lord. No question. And you will be either in a disembodied state (my view), or you will receive a temporary body while you await your permanent resurrection body.**

I say temporary body, because that's presumably what Moses and Elijah had on the Mount of Transfiguration when they appeared to Peter, James, and John (Matt 17:1-8). Did they have their permanent resurrection bodies? I don't think so. That doesn't happen until the rapture. **They just had a rental.**

So similar to Moses and Elijah, and everyone else who died before you, when you die, you will enter into a temporary state awaiting Christ's return. This is the intermediate state.

And you might ask, **"What do people do in the intermediate state?"** Well they do the same thing that we do here on earth—they wait for resurrection. They wait for their new bodies just like we do, except they get to wait in the presence of the Lord without any concern for death or sin. **Lucky them!**

And possibly, according to **Hebrews 12**, they cheer on the believers who are still alive on earth. They become part of that "great cloud of witnesses" that surrounds believers on earth who are running their race (**Heb 12:1-2**).

And speaking of disembodied, here's a third fact about the intermediate state.

3) Unbelievers who die, enter into **Hades**

We talked already about the eternal state of believers and unbelievers. Everyone will live forever, believer and unbeliever alike. It just depends on where you will spend your forever. Because human beings are made in the image of God, they are created to be eternal creatures.

The technical term for this is eternity. "God has put eternity in the hearts of men" (**Ecc 3:11**). We have eternity in our souls. We will live in eternity future, even though we didn't live in eternity past like God did.

And just like there is an intermediate state for believers in the presence of the Lord, there is an intermediate state for unbelievers outside the presence of the Lord. This place is referred to frequently as Hades.

This is the NT equivalent to the OT *Sheol*, although it's not entirely the same. Sheol was a location for both OT believers and unbelievers. Hades is only a location for unbelievers in the NT (especially in **Revelation**). We translate this word often as "hell." That's not entirely precise, unless you differentiate hell from the lake of fire. Hell or Hades is the holding place for unbelievers until the time that they are resurrected, judged, and dumped into the lake of fire. And Hades is a place of *conscious torment* just like the lake of fire (see **Matt 11:23; Luke 10:15; 16:23**).

There are other names for Hades or hell that are found in the NT. Jesus uses the term *Gehenna* for the same place as Hades (**Matt 23:15, 33; 25:41, 46**). There are a few different terms for "abyss" that probably refer to the same place, although those locations are used for demons as well as unbelievers.⁶

So unbelievers who die, enter into Hades and await resurrection. Not resurrection to life, but resurrection to eternal death (**Dan 12:2; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15**). John calls this the second death in **Revelation**. They are raised to judgment and sentenced to eternal death. **We don't want to be part of this judgment, and we won't be, if we are believers.**

One of the things that we have to deal with in the church age is the reality of death that is all around us. And there are a lot of perspectives on this in the world and throughout human history. Some perspectives are better than others. And one of the great comforts that we have as believers is the truth about life after death and hope after death in this world.

Benjamin Franklin said once, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."⁷ Thankfully, those of us who are Christians, only have to die once. But we've got to pay taxes

⁶ Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 398: "Other terms such as 'unquenchable fire' (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43, 48), 'furnace of fire' (Matt. 13:42, 50), 'outer darkness' (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), 'eternal fire' (Matt. 25:41), 'the lake that burns with fire and brimstone' (Rev. 21:8), and 'lake of fire' (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15) are used to describe eternal punishment. Unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire at the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15), and there they will live in torment for eternity."

⁷ Benjamin Franklin, letter to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy, November 13, 1789, in *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 10:69.

every year! Franklin's sentiment has been repeated often in this world. Interestingly, Franklin grew up in an orthodox Presbyterian household. But he rejected many of the tenets of his Christian upbringing. His view on death and the afterlife are... let's just say... unsatisfying.

Similarly another famous American, Mark Twain said, "Death is the only immortal who treats us all alike... the soiled and the pure, the rich and the poor, the loved and the unloved."⁸ In other words, the grim reaper is *an equal opportunity reaper*. The prince and the pauper both get buried six feet underground! There's a measure of truth in what Twain is saying there. But the Bible does differentiate the deaths and the eternities of the believer and the unbeliever. We've seen that in the intermediate state and the eternal state.

And in light of what the Bible teaches, let me give you four improper, but all too common, responses to death in our world. I'm calling these.

Four Improper Responses to Death for Believers in the Church:

Here's the first.

1) **Stoicism**

Here's something to never tell your kids at a funeral. "Buck up, soldier! Keep a stiff upper lip!" Don't ever say that.

"Don't cry, son. You need to be strong!" Don't ever say that. Don't believe that. You're not required to cry at a funeral. But we *should* grieve. Death is sad. We're human. We feel the loss of those we love. We're not robots or Stoics who view emotion as evil or pathetic or contemptible.

Stoicism is actually a very pagan approach to life and death. That's not the way Jesus lived or dealt with death. And neither should we. Here's a great verse to remember. When Jesus found out that his friend Lazarus died, you know what he did? He cried (see John 11:35).

Here's another wrong approach to death.

2) **Naturalism**

This is also a very pagan approach to life and death. "Oh, it's natural. Death is just natural." No, it's not! Death is an intruder on God's good world.⁹

In the movie, "The Lion King," Mufasa gives Simba a lecture about the "Circle of Life." It goes like this—the lions eat the antelope, but then they die and become fertilizer and the antelope eat the lions. And then Elton John starts singing, "It's the Circle of Life." Some people think that way about humans and the death of humans. "It's just natural. People become fertilizer."¹⁰

No! We are made in the image of God. And we were made to live forever. And there is eternity as part of our being. And death is an intruder on that.

So forget naturalism. And forget Stoicism. Here's another wrong approach to death.

3) **Nihilism**

Nihilism is a stream of philosophy that concludes that all life is meaningless and pointless. Life, death, religion, morals, etc. ... It's all utterly meaningless. You live. You die. Whatever!

Bertrand Russell, the twentieth century atheist and author wrote once that the universe as he understood it is purposeless and void of meaning. He said that the entire sum of human endeavors is "destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."¹¹

Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist and apologist for atheism expressed much the same view: "The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."¹² With beliefs like that, why grieve at death? Death sounds like an escape with a philosophical system like that! Just like that Guns N Roses song, "Live and Let Die." There's a certain nihilistic quality to that song.

⁸ Quoted in *Moments with Mark Twain*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920).

⁹ Keller, Sermon: "Death and Christian Hope"

¹⁰ Keller, Sermon: "Death and Christian Hope,"

¹¹ "A Free Man's Worship," 1903. <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>

¹² *River Out of Eden* (Basic Books, 1995), 133. Quoted by James Anderson, "Can Life Have Meaning Without God?" <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/can-life-have-meaning-without-god/>

And finally, there's an approach to death and life called...

4) **Hedonism**

Hedonism is the belief that the pursuit of pleasure is the chief goal in life. **“Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”** Actually, this approach to life is given some credibility by the Apostle Paul... more credibility than these other approaches to death. Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15:32**, “If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

In other words, if death is final and there's no hope for anything after that, then yeah, **“Live it up!”** What does it matter? If we have no hope for anything better, why not live a life of self-indulgence while we can?

But we do have hope for something better. Don't we? And there are rewards from this life that we will receive in the afterlife! So yes, we grieve when death gets the best of us, when death rears its ugly head. We grieve, and we even weep, like Jesus wept. But we don't grieve like those who have no hope.¹³

And that leaves us with one final question. What is the proper response to death among Christians? Write this down as a final statement for this lesson.

The One Proper Response to Death for Believers in the Church:

1) **Grief with hope**

Paul said in **1 Thessalonians 4:13** that we should grieve, but we don't grieve like those who have no hope. We grieve, but we also hope.

To hope and not grieve is a mistake. We *should* grieve. Death is sad. Death is an intruder! Death robbed us of God's great world in the Garden of Eden.

When Stephen died in the book of **Acts**, the men around him were sad. “Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him” (**Acts 8:2**). Paul said in **Philippians** that if Epaphroditus had died, he would have been filled with “sorrow upon sorrow” (**Phil. 2:27**).

We don't hope without grief. But also, grief without hope is a mistake too. In fact, it's an untruth.

Let me close with this. I want to say something at first that may sound a little discouraging, but then will hopefully ultimately be encouraging. We live in a world where death is not as ever-present as it was in the first century. I'm middle-aged. **I told Alastair the other day that his father is middle-aged, and he said, “middle-aged?”** Maybe that's too generous? But I realize that most people throughout human history would be entering the latter stage of their lives at my age.

And what's amazing is that we live on the safest soil on the planet. For the last 100+ years, America has been a place of incredible, unprecedented safety. And we've had relatively good health and long-life expectancy too. Which throughout the world and throughout human history, is a massive anomaly!

But even in our safe country, I am assured of this—my future will be filled with death. I've done a lot of funerals in my time as a pastor. There's more to come. Unless the Lord comes back soon, I will deal with death again and again and again and again, including my own death. I hate to be morbid but it's true. We will deal increasingly with death as we age.

Death is in our future, church. Death and taxes. The two great certainties in our world! Thanks a lot, Benjamin Franklin. **How are we going to deal with it?**

Here's how we're going to deal with it—we're going to grieve! We are going to grieve, because death is an intruder on God's good world! We brought it here with our sin! So we are going to grieve.

¹³ AUGUSTINE: “And you should not grieve as the heathen do who have no hope, because we have hope, based on the most assured promise, that as we have not lost our dear ones who have departed from this life but have merely sent them ahead of us, so we also shall depart and shall come to that life where, more than ever, their dearness to us will be proportional to the closeness we shared on earth and where we shall love them without fear of parting.” Quoted in Gorday, ed., *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ACCS, 85.

But we are not going to grieve like those who have no hope. Because we *have* hope. Christ is coming back for us. And whether dead or alive, we will be with him. We will be with him. Bow with me in a word of prayer!

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