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Chapter Twelve

SURVEY OF THOUGHT REGARDING THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

The problem of the soul's state during the interval between death and the resurrection of the body has been recognized, of course, ever since the closing of the New Testament canon. The idea of a period of waiting has always tempted more creative minds to fill the space with imaginative happenings, and the tendency to moralize about these happenings and turn them into some kind of purgatorial scenario has been natural enough. Once begun, the process invited elaboration and such works as Dante's *Divine Comedy* were the almost inevitable outcome.

By the time of the Reformation, such scenarios had acquired so gross a quality that the whole idea of purgatory was vehemently repudiated in Protestant theology. Yet the circumstances which had inspired the concept remained to invite a continuing debate. How *was* the soul engaged in that interval?

Our minds are so constituted that we find it disturbing to have to admit that the future beyond the grave holds some rather critical unknowns. This is particularly so when we seem to have such clear and reassuring promises about the situation relating to either *end* of the interval. Thus the nature of this interim period continues to be a matter of dispute.

Soul in the interval: conscious or unconscious?

Only two "solutions" have found wide acceptance among Christian people. The first is not really a solution at all but merely a more candid statement of the problem itself: we shall experience a tentatively, happy, half-complete, "sort of personal," existence. And the second is rather unsatisfactory because it entirely

disengages the soul from the situation during that interim: we simply sleep through the problem.

So we end up either with a disembodied spirit fully conscious of a certain "incompleteness" and burdened with a genuine sense of uncertainty. Or we end up in the total unconsciousness of a deep sleep until we are awakened to rejoin our bodies. The phrase "present with the Lord" merely describes *where* we sleep.

Joy while awaiting judgment?

The genuine "uncertainty" of which I speak results from the fact that we shall be, for so long, in the presence of the very One who is to be our Judge when the time comes to be assessed as to the worth of our life's work in the Lord. That such a judgment is in store for us is quite clear from 1 Corinthians 3:13-15:

Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: **but he himself shall be saved**; yet so as by fire.

How, then, shall we be at ease in his presence knowing that it will be his task after a while to pronounce judgment on our lives? Paul is *very* explicit about this coming event; and though the soul's salvation is not in jeopardy at all, our spiritual stature certainly *is*, while we await the Judge's decision — a situation hardly conducive to unalloyed joy in the interim.

Soul sleep: unconscious existence until the judgment?

As for those who hold to a deep sleep, they do have a number of Scriptures which seem to support their position. Yet, as an alternative, it seems equally disturbing. It implies a kind of non-existence for an unknown period of time in which we are quite helpless.

It is certainly true that the concept of soul-sleeping is implied in many places (cf. Deuteronomy 31:16; Job 7:21; Psalm 17: 15; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11; Acts

7:60; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; 5:10³⁰⁰). Yet it is a view which has been widely condemned by Christian writers in recent years.

This is partly because the idea became associated with certain distortions of Scripture which have led to highly questionable theologies (such as modern Seventh Day Adventism). The commonly applied principle of guilt by association has discouraged more than one promising line of enquiry in recent years, preventing any open-minded appraisal of its worth. No one wants to be accused of heresy. Yet the association is often quite coincidental. No doubt Arius, for example, believed that two and two makes four. But this does not mean that every seminary student who has learned this basic mathematical truth is automatically suspect as a potential Arian heretic!

At any rate, the concept of soul-sleeping is certainly intimated in the works of some of the very earliest Church Fathers, so it is by no means merely a recent development.

Tatian (c. 110 - 172) in his *Address to the Greeks* wrote: "The human soul consists of many parts, and is not simple: it is composite, so as to manifest itself through the body; *neither could it ever appear without the body*; nor does the flesh

³⁰⁰ "And the Lord said unto Moses, Behold, you shall sleep with your fathers. . . ." Deuteronomy 31:16.

" . . . for now I shall sleep in the dust. . . ." Job 7:21.

"As for me I [David] will behold thy face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness." Psalm 17:15.

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel 12:2.

"[Jesus] said to them [the disciples], Our friend Lazarus sleeps; but I go that I may awake him out of sleep." John 11:11.

"And [Stephen] kneeled down and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Acts 7:60.

"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep."

1 Corinthians 11:30

"After that, he [Jesus] was seen of above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep." 1 Corinthians 15:16.

"If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain: you are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." 1 Corinthians 15:18.

"But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the firstfruits of them that slept." 1 Corinthians 15:20.

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." 1 Thessalonians 4:14.

"For God hath not appointed us to wrath but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him." 1 Thessalonians 5:9, 10.

rise again without the soul."³⁰¹ [Emphasis mine.] This absolute interdependence of body and soul seems to preclude a state of disembodied consciousness until their reunion. How else could this be better described, therefore, than as a "sleep"? The question of what happens to the soul in this interim of unconsciousness was not, however, crystallized into a doctrine of actual soul-sleeping until somewhat later, particularly among certain Arabian and Armenian sects, though traces of the view constantly appear in the writings of the Church Fathers. I may say that this is *not* my position, as will be apparent in the next chapter. But if all that is meant is that the soul is as unconscious as any man is when asleep, then the term (as used in Scripture) is surely very appropriate, to say the least.

In his *Church History*, Eusebius (c. 265 - 339) speaks of the Arabian Christian sects which were apparently influenced by Origen (c. 185 - 254) who adopted this view. They, however, went beyond soul-sleep. The soul had no conscious existence and *perhaps in fact no existence at all* in the absence of the body.³⁰² It is today believed that there was a strong Jewish influence in these Arabian communities which was partly responsible for this trend of thought.

Petrus Pomponatius (d. 1525) who openly espoused the view that the soul without the body was as dead as the body without the soul and therefore quite unconscious, was roundly condemned by a papal bull dated 1513. The view had already been condemned by various councils (Lyons, 1274; Ferrara, 1438; Florence, 1439; Trent, 1545 - 63), even though it had actually been advocated by Pope John XXII (d. 1304).

It is not unlikely that Pomponatius was influenced by the fact that he had studied both philosophy and *medicine* at Padua. He also possessed an independent turn of mind which brought him into confrontation with the ecclesiastical authorities. But his family being of noble rank, he was merely censured and escaped further penalty by saying he was only speaking philosophically! In the light of certain modern trends in neurophysiology (discussed in Chapter 8) it is at least interesting to see that a man with a not altogether dissimilar educational background (at a far less sophisticated level of course than that of Eccles) should have tended towards the same opinion: namely, that consciousness or mindedness is effectively suspended as such as soon as the brain ceases to function and begins to disintegrate.

I suppose it must normally be a disturbing thought to many people that there should be a period of complete "silence" as it were (a descriptive word used in

³⁰¹ Tatian: *Address to the Greeks*, chap. 15, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, vol. 2, p.71.

³⁰² Eusebius: see footnote re Arabian Christian sects in his *Church History*, chapter 6, section 32, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Oxford, Parker & Co., Second Series, 1890, vol. 1, p.279.

Psalm 115:17³⁰³) between death and resurrection, especially since certain Scriptures clearly promise the believer immediate passage into the Lord's presence — which suggests a very different prospect.

A resurrected body unnecessary?

Thus commentaries and theologies which deal with the intermediate state of the soul are tempted to speak in one breath as though the soul can be perfectly happy though disembodied while in the next breath noting that the body is essential to the soul's completion. The important thing is to avoid any admission that there might in fact be an "interval" of unconsciousness between death and resurrection. Thus Robert L. Dabney, in a paper on the theology of R. J. Breckinridge (1800 - 1871), wrote in his usual rather brusque manner:³⁰⁴

[Breckinridge] very properly repeats, and in animated, eloquent language, the familiar old truth, that our whole interest in a future existence depends on the continuance of our proper and conscious identity. But he then most preposterously asserts that **the united immortal existence of body as well as soul is essential to a proper conscious personal identity.** [My emphasis]

While admitting previously that *bodily* resurrection is essential and hence assured, it is, according to Dabney, quite preposterous to make this an absolute requirement of personal conscious identity. The less rational the argument, the greater the need for dramatic emphasis — in this case by the use of somewhat abusive language! The defense of a fully conscious intermediate state unfortunately is often — if not always — presented in a highly emotional way. Only by pounding the desk (or pulpit) can one carry any conviction to an audience likely to observe that the argument itself is faulty in its reasoning.

On this same issue Franz Delitzsch quoted Johann Heinrich Ursinus (1534-1583) as having written:³⁰⁵

³⁰³ “The dead praise not the Lord, neither any that go down into silence.”
Psalm 115:17

³⁰⁴ Dabney, R.L., *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 (reprint of 1890), vol. 1, p.43.

³⁰⁵ Ursinus: as quoted by Franz Delitzsch, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, translated by Robert E. Wallis (2nd edition, 1899), Grand Rapids, Baker reprint, 1966, Appendix, p.528.

It is impossible that the [disembodied] soul should continue in an unnatural state forever, into which it has fallen. . .by means of sin, and for which God did not create it. For although after death, souls live and praise the Highest, *yet they are not the entire man, but only an essential piece of man.*

On this account, in order that God might not have created man in vain — which is contrary to his wisdom — man must, although by death **perchance he has ceased to be a man**, nevertheless, by resurrection of his body again become a man and remain one for ever. [Emphasis mine]

So here we have the problem merely restated once more. No resolution is offered. According to Ursinus, the soul is not truly human apart from the body; so one has to ask, What kind of a ghost is it that "lives and praises the Highest" while it exists in a condition which can only be described as "in vain" meanwhile?

W. G. T. Shedd attempted to resolve the problem by acknowledging it, yet making it seem of no consequence. He wrote:³⁰⁶

Between death and the resurrection, when the human body and soul are separated, *although there is self-consciousness in the disembodied spirit* and so the most important element in personality, yet there is an incomplete human personality until the resurrection of the body restores the original union between soul and body. . . .

*Soul taken by itself is a particular intelligent substance **yet not a person** because it is an incomplete part of a greater whole. **It requires to be joined to a body before there can be an individual man.** . . . [My emphasis]*

It is hard to conceive of a more unsatisfactory resolution of a problem that is clearly a very real one. What kind of an impersonal, incomplete abstraction of intelligent substance, unindividuated and disembodied, is here in view praising God and rejoicing in the Lord meanwhile?

The problem is still with us. In the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, the article on the *Intermediate State* concludes that "even for the righteous, the intermediate state would seem to be one of imperfection, partly because the spirit is without bodily manifestation and partly because **the joys of heaven are not forthcoming for the saints** until after the *Second Coming and the final*

³⁰⁶ Shedd, W. G. T., *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan reprint (of 1888), vol. 2, p.270 and 278.

*Judgment.*³⁰⁷ Can one honestly say that a state of conscious imperfection is what we hope for as we long to be with the Lord? In what sense does such a state fulfill the promise that when we see Him we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2³⁰⁸)? But there is no logical alternative except a state of unconsciousness or "sleep" in Jesus which at least has the advantage of eliminating all sense of time — *if* there is any time to be passed.

A. H. Strong in his *Systematic Theology* addresses the same question, cutting the Gordian Knot by merely ignoring it: "The Scriptures affirm the conscious existence of both the righteous and the wicked after death and prior to resurrection. In the intermediate state the soul is without a body, yet this state is for the righteous a state of conscious joy, and for the wicked a state of conscious suffering."³⁰⁹

I find it difficult to think of any single statement or passage of Scripture which actually supports the view that such consciousness is experienced prior to the resurrection of the body. If the story of Dives and Lazarus³¹⁰ is taken literally, it is instructive. Dives has a tongue, Lazarus has a finger, and Abraham has a bosom. . . . Can this, then, really indicate that it is a preview of the state of the soul *before* the general resurrection, seeing tongue and finger and bosom belong to a body? And if it cannot be taken literally, then the usual interpretation loses much of its force. It is not at all certain that this story of Dives and Lazarus was designed to teach what it

³⁰⁷ Article on the "Intermediate State" contributed by R. K. Harrison in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, edited by Merrill C. Tenney, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1975, vol. 3, p.296, col. b.

³⁰⁸ "But we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." 1 John 3:2.

³⁰⁹ Strong, A.H. *Systematic Theology*, Valley Forge, PA., Judson Press, 1906 (1974 reprint of 3 volumes in 1), p.998.

³¹⁰ "There was a certain rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried. And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and sees Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." Luke 16:19-26.

is commonly made to teach. In its context it seems rather to be a warning to those entrusted with wealth not to forget they also have a very serious duty towards the poor, and that they will be called to an accounting. Privilege and responsibility must never be divorced. To make his point, the Lord seems to have simply adopted an imagery commonly accepted by the Jews and therefore more readily understood. But to provide a picture of the state of the saved and unsaved between death and resurrection was almost certainly *not* the purpose for which the Lord Himself intended it. It is hardly a sufficient basis for anything more than this.³¹¹

Ambrose, the spiritual father of Augustine, taught that the soul, so long as it is separated from the body, is suspended in a kind of ambiguous condition (*ambiguo suspenditur*). In commenting on this, Shedd observed that there was a wide divergence of opinion within the declarations of any writer of that period of doctrinal development (i.e., during the third and fourth centuries in particular). And he added: "One thing is certain, that the nearer we approach the days of the Apostles, the less do we hear about an underworld or of Christ's descent into it."³¹²

It has been widely held that the body is only raised in order to *enhance* the happiness of the saints. It must logically follow that the bodies of the unsaved are only raised to *enhance* their misery. The idea of the first seems innocent enough, but the logical consequence of the second seems most repugnant.

If "enhancement" is the sole purpose of the resurrection of the body and if the soul can get along well enough without it anyway, then the resurrection of the body seems to leave us on the horns of a dilemma. The enhancement of the pleasure of the saints is achieved only by a process that inevitably "enhances" the misery of the lost³¹³.

³¹¹ Yet Shedd observed that while the doctrine of the Intermediate State has had considerable variety of construction, owing to the mixing of mythological elements within the biblical, the presentation which Christ gives in the parable of Dives and Lazarus has largely furnished the basis of the doctrine of an intermediate *place* as it later developed (*Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, p.59). It is therefore important to point out, contrary to what is sometimes held, that the use of the phrase "a certain rich man" to introduce the story does not mean that it is certainly to be taken as history and not a mere parable. Luke 12:16 employs a similar opening, but states clearly that what follows *is* a parable ("He spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man. . . ." Luke 12:16). See also Luke 13:6; 19:11 and 12; 20:9 — all of which open with the words "a certain. . ." though each is statedly a parable.

³¹² Shedd, W. G. T., *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan reprint (of 1888), vol. 2, p.593, fn.

³¹³ Since the unsaved also face the same situation, it could be termed for them "a slightly reduced version of ultimate retribution", as James T. Addison put it in his *Life After*

I have to ask myself, then, whether this is really an acceptable idea. If it involves someone dear to me whose misery is to be magnified as a direct consequence of a programme (the resurrection of the body) which is really designed solely for the enhancement of my pleasure, can I honestly view this as a happy prospect? The idea was indeed suggested in Medieval times, for it seemed a logical necessity if the body is not entirely *necessary* to the conscious existence of the redeemed.

The intermediate state a conscious one?

Moreover, the current concept of the intermediate state has the odd effect of converting it into a kind of pre-trial provisional reward (or punishment) *before* the Judge gets around to pronouncing his judgment as to the actual reward (or punishment) to be awarded.

In the *Wycliffe Encyclopedia* it is observed:³¹⁴

Since all Bible-believing Christians believe in the resurrection of the body and the future judgment, it follows that all believe in an intermediate state between death and resurrection. Not all Christians, however, *agree* as to the condition of the dead during this interval. All recognize that it is different from the condition of those living on earth, and some believe that it is at least in certain details quite different from what it will be, subsequent to the resurrection.

The problem in the doctrine of the intermediate state, then, is the nature of the existence of the righteous *and the wicked dead* prior to the resurrection.

This assuredly sums up the nature of the problem, but it contributes nothing towards a possible resolution, though it seems to be taking for granted that it is a conscious state since this is really why there is a problem to begin with. It is a useful operating principle in the solution of many problems to assume, first of all, that the root of the problem itself is sometimes to be found *in what everyone agrees upon*. In this issue, the problem would therefore seem to be rooted in the general agreement that the intermediate state is a conscious one, which might thus be the basic error. Until we abandon this fundamental assumption, it may be we shall never find a solution to the problem it creates.

Death in the Beliefs of Mankind, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1932, p.202.

³¹⁴ In an article contributed by Robert G. Rayburn in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, Chicago, Moody Bible Institute Press, edited by Charles F. Pfeiffer, *et al.*, 1975, vol. 1, p.850, col. b.

In A. R. Fausset's *Bible Cyclopaedia* under *Resurrection*, the author observes: "Essentially the same body wherewith the unbeliever sinned shall be the object of punishment, in order that every one may receive the things done by the instrumentality of (Greek *dia*) the body (2 Corinthians 5 :10³¹⁵)."³¹⁶ This usefully adds an additional reason for the emphasis on the body. And since the Lord Jesus is to judge *all* men and not just the unsaved (cf. Matthew 25:32³¹⁷ — the sheep *and* the goats), it would seem that this resurrection of the body could only be awaited in fear and trembling by saint and sinner alike if the intermediate state is a fully conscious one. For even though the saints will undoubtedly be happy indeed to see the dross purged away in the flame of the final judgment, it is still difficult to think of being in the Lord's presence for centuries or even for millennia waiting and wondering how much will be left to commend after the flame has done its work.

I am not here thinking of anything even vaguely approaching a purgatory. I am thinking only of the fact that the fire will try every man's work of what sort it has been, and many of us may well discover that there is little left to commend — even though we ourselves shall indeed be saved (1 Corinthians 3:15³¹⁸). Motive is the moral test of action,³¹⁹ and who knows his own heart (1 Samuel 16:7 and Jeremiah 17:9³²⁰)? How many, or should we really say how *few*, of our good deeds had a pure motive behind them? Who can stand such a fire?

³¹⁵ "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." 2 Corinthians 5:10.

³¹⁶ Fausset, A. R. *Bible Cyclopaedia*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, undated, c.1880, p.604.

³¹⁷ "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats." Matthew 25:31, 32.

³¹⁸ "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." 1 Corinthians 3:15.

³¹⁹ For some thoughts on the basis of rewards and punishment, see the author's *Sovereignty of Grace*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1979, p.247f, 250f, and chapter 14.

³²⁰ "But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Jeremiah 17:9.

As to the concept of purgatory, it was in the Alexandrian School of Theology that the idea of the intermediate state passed into that of a period of gradual purification of the souls of the saints — to prepare them for entry into the direct presence of God. And this in the course of time opened the way for the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory with all the embroideries such as one finds in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It is a trait of the human mind that when we find ourselves with a blank space of time to fill, imagination — like a little child — is always eager to supply a scenario.

The Reformers rejected this doctrine unequivocally, and according to Louis Berkhof, they also rejected “the whole idea of a *real* [his emphasis] intermediate state which carried with it the idea of an intermediate *place* [emphasis mine]. They held that those who died in the Lord at once entered into the bliss of heaven, while those who died in their sins at once descended into hell.”³²¹

Soul sleeping rejected by the creeds

Unfortunately, this of course still left entirely unanswered the vexing problem of why the body should at some subsequent time be raised and reunited with the soul. In itself, the statement does not address this problem at all: it merely rejects (and quite properly) an existing but abortive attempt to deal with the “interim.”

G. C. Berkouwer frankly acknowledges the mystery which hangs on the substantive reality of a soul disembodied during this period of waiting. He says: “Scripture itself gives us no help in a search for an analyzable anthropological solution.” He asks, “When the ‘soul’ is separated from the body, what activity is it still able to carry out?” And, quoting H. Dooyeweerd, he says, “The unqualified answer is obviously ‘nothing.’”³²² Which is at least forthright, but still needs further elucidation.

John Calvin at first strongly opposed the concept of soul-sleeping and wrote a tract entitled *Psychopannychia* in which he condemned it. As he matured, he seems to have felt that the issue was not really made clear in Scripture, and he came to view the matter as one of those “non-fundamental” doctrines about which there could be considerable room for disagreement without loss of fellowship. In a later edition of the *Institutes*, he wrote (IV, i, 12):

³²¹ Berkhof, Louis, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, 1939, p.681. Berkhof had previously observed, “sheol. . . is certainly represented as a state of more or less conscious existence, though not one of bliss” (p.675). One wonders what a “more or less conscious” state would signify. A stupor?

³²² Berkouwer, C. G., *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1975, p.255, 256.

Why should there be a division on this point, if one church be of opinion that souls, at their departure from their bodies, are immediately removed to heaven; and another church ventures to determine nothing respecting their local situation, but is nevertheless firmly convinced that they live unto the Lord; and if this diversity of sentiment on both sides be free from all fondness for contention and obstinacy of assertion?

A diversity of opinion respecting these non-essential points ought not to be a cause of discord among Christians.

A somewhat similar shift of opinion, back and forth, was evident also in England at that time. In 1552 there was a Fortieth Article attached to the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England, which reads as follows:

The souls of them that depart this life do neither die with their bodies nor sleep idly. They which say that the souls of such as depart hence do sleep, being without sense, feeling, or perceiving, until the day of judgment, or who affirm that the soul dies with the body, and at the last day shall be raised up with the same, do utterly dissent from the right view declared unto us in Holy Scripture.

But seven years later this Article was deleted by Archbishop Parker and does not form any part of the Articles of belief as finally subscribed to by the clergy in 1562. The Church of England abstained from any definite censure of those who held a contrary view.

Thus the problem has clearly remained unresolved throughout the centuries and one must accept the fact that there is still room for re-consideration of the issue.

The fear that any state of unconsciousness is to be equated with virtual non-existence is entirely unfounded but it seems to be very commonly held by those who reject the concept of soul-sleeping. Yet we know from daily observation that in this life there is no necessary connection whatever between unconsciousness and non-existence. In terms of vital processes, we are just as *alive* while we are asleep as we are while we are awake: surely this could be just as true for the spirit as for the body — if necessary.

The idea of a kind of half-existence, of almost "impersonal" identity, in the interim between death and resurrection is hardly a meaningful one. Whereas we really ought to have no difficulty with either of the two alternatives which remain: (a) a deep sleep involving total unconsciousness but no loss of identity, or (b) a *fully conscious state* because of immediate reunion with the new body. The first assumes that a time interval really exists but is not experienced: the second assumes that there is no interval whatever — because **there is NO TIME FOR IT!**

The argument that the soul can be happy and personally identifiable without the body inevitably makes the resurrection of the body quite unnecessary and

therefore challenges the many explicit passages of Scripture (especially in Paul's epistles) that lay emphasis upon it.

The proposal that the righteous are at ease in the Lord's presence even though still awaiting his assessment of their past life while the wicked spend these same centuries or millennia in a state of partial penalty until the resurrection of the body heralds the final reward and the final punishment, strikes one as a most unbelievable circumstance in either case. A tentative expectation of reward yet to be clarified, and a mild form of penalty yet to be applied in full, seems much more like a period of probation for the righteous and of pre-trial imprisonment for the wicked. This scarcely bears the stamp of the justice or the mercy of the One who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nor does it seem a sufficient basis for Paul's excitement at the prospect of leaving this present world and passing on to be with the Lord.

Theory of soul sleeping tested

It may be useful to bring this survey to a close by a little exercise in "sanctified imagination."

Let us assume for the moment that we really do continue in some kind of ghostly form while awaiting our bodies — the saints in a conscious state of joyful anticipation in the Lord's presence, and the lost in a state of fearful anticipation of a terrible prospect in the future. And on the basis of this scenario, let us consider very briefly the seemingly necessary course of events pertaining to a few representative biblical characters about whom we have sufficient information to make it reasonable to attempt a reconstruction of what would actually have to happen in their particular case. It will then be seen that there are some "difficult questions" indeed yet to be answered.

I have chosen (1) **Adam**, (2) **Cain**, (3) **Lazarus of Bethany**, and (4) **Paul** — each of whose "destinies" can be pretty well taken for granted. Adam surely died a redeemed soul; Cain almost certainly did not. Lazarus made an advance journey and returned at a unique period in history in which the Lord was present on the earth (which He was not, in the same sense, either before His Incarnation or after His Ascension). As to Paul, we have the advantage of knowing from his own inspired writings some very important clues as to his precise expectations.

For each of these, let us exercise a little freedom and try to visualize the possible course of events following their respective deaths, assuming they experienced an interim state in possession of full consciousness while awaiting the Last Day and the resurrection of their bodies.

(1) I have chosen **Adam** because (a) he has obviously the longest to wait, and (b) he has perhaps the most reason to feel the burden of responsibility as the father of a race which, but for him, might have peopled the world with joy and gladness rather than pain and tragedy, and (c) he alone (with Eve) once experienced the reality of a perfect world and the unalloyed joy of living in it, and therefore would have reason to feel the greatest sense of loss. Unlike Adam and Eve, the rest of us are born in sin and raised in trouble: they were created perfect and enjoyed the pleasure of a garden paradise, idyllic in its setting.

So, according to present views of this interim between death and resurrection, for thousands of years Adam would presumably be witness to the constant arrival in his interim "place" of millions of his descendants who come to share his temporary disembodied condition, all of whom have experienced in life sorrow and shame and vexation of spirit for which he himself was in a sense responsible. Until the final trial and Judgment (which is yet to come after the resurrection of the body), he could not know whether anything at all would be left to comfort him or whether the whole of his almost one thousand years of life would prove to have produced only perishable results. His salvation would not be in question, but the nature of his crown would be.

Can one really imagine his being at ease in the Lord's presence with such an uncertain future ahead, waiting to hear the final assessment yet to be pronounced on his life? We may argue that when he left this world, the past fell away to be forgotten so that no such sad thoughts would plague his waiting. But the Judgment he would have to wait for is clearly a real judgment (for good and bad), of whatever "sort" it is (Romans 14:10 and 2 Corinthians 5:10³²³), even if when it is over he will rejoice and have praise of God — as every one of us is to do (1 Corinthians 4:5³²⁴). The problem is this waiting in the presence of the Judge for 6000 years until the verdict is rendered.

(2) **Cain** "hated his brother" and was therefore a "murderer" (1 John 3:12³²⁵) and we know that "no murderer hath eternal life" (1 John 3:15³²⁶).

³²³ "But why do you judge your brother? or why do you set at nought your brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." Romans 14:10.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." 2 Corinthians 5:10.

³²⁴ "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God." 1 Corinthians 4:5.

³²⁵ "For this is the message that we have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. Not as Cain, who was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And

He seems clearly to have died unrepentant and "cursed from the earth" (Genesis 4:5-11³²⁷).

Assuming, as seems likely, that Cain being "of that wicked one" (1 John 3:12) died unsaved, we have the situation of a condemned prisoner who nevertheless awaits 6000 years for the official confirmation of his guilt, a kind of pre-trial custody until judgment is handed down by the Judge. Multiplied by the *millions* who must find themselves in the same unhappy position, this taxes one's imagination. It seems contrary to our sense of justice that for different lengths of time (depending on how long ago they lived) the unsaved are to suffer varying degrees of punishment *before* actually standing in the presence of the Judge to be sentenced. The assignment to such an interim state is itself a penalty.

(3) I have identified **Lazarus** as the Lazarus of Bethany because I have in mind the beloved brother of Martha and Mary rather than the afflicted soul who sat and begged at the rich man's table.

Lazarus presents us with an instance of a man who was unequivocally dead (since his body was already disintegrating³²⁸) and yet was resuscitated and returned to his former condition of life, *only to die later*.

wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous." 1 John 3:12.

³²⁶ "Whosoever hates his brother is a murderer: and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him." 1 John 3 :15.

³²⁷ "In the process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering. But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why are you wroth? And why is your countenance fallen? If you do well, shall you not be accepted? And if you do not well, sin lies at the door. And unto you shall be his [its] desire and [but] you shall [can] rule over him [it]. And Cain talked with Abel, his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel your brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries unto me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand." Genesis 4:3-11.

³²⁸ He was *legally* dead, since he had passed the probationary period of entombment for three days and nights without evidence of revival, a period which was required by law to certify death in those days.

His case illustrates two facets of the present issue. First, we have not the slightest intimation of any recollection (after his recovery) of conscious experience on the other side of the grave.³²⁹ This is indeed an argument from silence, but it seems almost certain that the very notoriety attached to his resuscitation at the time (cf. John 11:45 and also 12:17-19³³⁰) would have guaranteed the survival of at least some such stories beyond the mere fact of his recovery if *he* had had any such stories to tell. Clearly, he was well known locally and the number of people who were curious about him was evidently very considerable. The news must have spread far and wide because Jerusalem was crowded with visitors from many parts of the world, it being Passover time. One would certainly expect at least some record of subsequent conversations with friends on such a fundamentally important and fascinating subject. We do not even have a "Gospel of Lazarus" among the many spurious "testaments" or "gospels" like those attributed to Mary, Nicodemus, and other well known persons who figure prominently in the New Testament.

But we see another facet of the whole matter brought into focus by considering what would have to happen to the departed spirit of Lazarus while the Lord was still in the flesh. This is, of course, true of any of those raised by the Lord during those thirty-three years, but especially true of Lazarus, for his contemporaries must (since it was a view widely held) certainly have assumed his spirit had departed to a nether world. They would be particularly curious in this instance — even if the case of Jairus' daughter or the widow of Nain's son did not stir them in this regard since these two were not yet certifiably dead.

Lazarus had died: if he then became a fully conscious ghost for the few intervening days while his body was resting in the tomb, and if as a ghost he was present with the Lord during that period, must he not then have walked across the garden where the tomb was, in ghostly company with Him as they approached his own tomb? Did he then pass on into the tomb through the stone closure, there to wait in the darkness, as it were, until he received orders to come forth, once more united with a reconstituted body? Moreover, if we assume that his soul passed into the Lord's presence, would it not be a purified soul made perfect — since, when we see

³²⁹ On "out-of-body" experiences, refer to footnote (261) in chapter 11, p.159.

³³⁰ "Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him." John 11:45.

"The people that were with him [Jesus] when he called Lazarus out of the grave and raised him from the dead, bare record. For this cause the people also met him [on the day of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem], for that they heard that he had done this miracle. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive you how you prevail nothing? Behold the world is gone after him!" John 12:17-19.

Him, we shall be like Him (1 John 3:2³³¹)? Then did that purified soul return to the still mortal, and therefore far from perfect body, only to be re-contaminated again?

Does this kind of scenario make any sense whatever? Yet if we assume that Lazarus remained fully conscious while his body lay in the grave, some such scenario seems to be needed in order to give us any kind of "picture" of events with respect to the activities of his spirit until the time of his temporary reprieve. The whole situation in this instance, as in all such cases of resuscitation, is wrapped in imponderables.

Suppose, however, one accepts the idea that after death the spirit remains unconscious in God's keeping until He sends it with Jesus to be re-united with a glorified body, then the problem is resolved: for Lazarus never had any consciousness whatever in the interim — he was, as Jesus said, "asleep." God sent his spirit back to rejoin the resurrected body as Jesus called him forth from the tomb.³³²

(4) The position of **Paul** presents certain interesting anomalies because of his own clearly stated expectations.

First, he declares joyfully that to be absent from this earthly body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5 :8³³³). He says he is quite confident of this — and may I interject, so am I! But he by no means wishes to be in the presence of the Lord "unclothed" (2 Corinthians 5:4³³⁴). This is not what he wants. So he clearly looks forward to being "clothed" in the Lord's presence, i.e., embodied in a *new* body. This embodiment, he tells us, is to be realized when the Lord comes again. He is most explicit on this point.

³³¹ “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” 1 John 3:2.

³³² It must be remembered, of course, that this was an exceptional instance, for the resurrected body was the *old* body, not the new one which Lazarus will, one day, be clothed in.

³³³ “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:8.

³³⁴ “For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.” 2 Corinthians 5:4.

The fact is that there must be a resurrection of the dead or else, as Paul points out, *those who have fallen asleep in Christ are perished!* (1 Corinthians 15:13, 18).³³⁵ This is quite clear. Without resurrection, those asleep in Christ must be written off. They are "lost" (Greek *apolumi*). They are not half-saved: they are perished entirely, as though they had never been. Everything hinges on resurrection. . . and what can this mean except resurrection of their bodies? A certain number who are still alive when the Lord *does* return will obviously not fall asleep at all. But these, too, will undergo a transformation of body "in the twinkling of an eye" — and at the last trump: the very signal identified in 1 Thessalonians 4:16³³⁶ as the sound of the "trumpet of God" which marks the end of this present age.

Thus everything, including even the salvation of the spirit or soul, clearly depends upon the reunion of the perfected spirit with the resurrected perfected body. Then shall a corrupted body put on incorruption and a mortal spirit put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52-54³³⁷). This will place the whole man not merely in the position of being capable of not sinning and so capable of not dying, but in the position of being IN-capable of doing either — ever again. Sin and death will be constitutionally beyond us, as temptation is constitutionally beyond God Himself (James. 1:13³³⁸).

It is impossible to suppose that Paul looked eagerly forward to an interim of "undress" simply because he groaned in his present body. Burdened as his present body indeed was, he still did not prefer to be disembodied in spite of the relief this might seem to afford. His sinful body was still to be preferred to no body at all. The idea of a ghostly half-existence was not by any means what he wished for. "We do not *want* to be unclothed," he said. Unlike the Greek philosophers, Christians have

³³⁵ "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen. . . . For if the dead rise not, then is Christ not raised: and if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain: you are yet in your sins. Then they also who are fallen asleep in Christ are perished." 1 Corinthians 15:13, 16-18. Either they have already perished (since they have yet no body) or they *have* a body already (because they have been resurrected.)

³³⁶ "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God." 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

³³⁷ "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory." 1 Corinthians 15:52-54.

³³⁸ "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil." James 1:13.

never seen disembodiment as something to be preferred. A naked soul is not a happy prospect for man. Paul wanted to be absent from this body and present with the Lord, but not without embodiment (2 Corinthians 5:2³³⁹). He wanted to be whole as he stood in the presence of his Lord. Only so could he be like Him when he was to meet Him face to face and see Him as He is — a Man in a glorified body.

Does any of this suggest for a moment that he was anticipating with joy an interim of unknown duration, an interim of shadowy existence in a state of imperfection? Did he really expect to have to wait in uncertainty as to how his life would be assessed, and to do this meanwhile as a mere ghost of his former self? And would he be incognito as he awaited reunion with his body? After all, even the Lord needed his body to establish his identity. Would not Paul need his for the same purpose?

Of Paul we therefore at least know this: a ghostly existence was not at all the prospect he eagerly hoped for. And as John had put it, this wonderful climax is to come "when He shall appear" — *and not before*. Somehow, we have to reconcile this with 2 Corinthians 5:8,³⁴⁰ for both promises are equally true.

Quest for resolution

Attempts to construct a behind-the-scenes scenario for the departed lead to absurdities when an interval of *conscious* waiting is introduced, and the simple law of parsimony certainly suggests, by the very complexity of the problems thus created, that such re-creations are pointing in the wrong direction.

Some of the scenarios portrayed in Appendix I, Section B, are absurd in the extreme. It is true that we seem to find points of coincidence cropping up between these stories and certain passages in the New Testament which at least appear to reflect some details of them (cf. for example, Ephesians 4:8-10; 1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6; 2 Peter 2:4; and some others like Jude 6; see Appendix I). These passages have caused such endless discussion and argument that it seems unlikely I can contribute usefully to the debate over their precise meaning. But in the immediate subject matter of this volume, it appears to me that we have a sufficiently new understanding of the true nature of time, as opposed to eternity, that a resolution may now be within our reach.

³³⁹ "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." 2 Corinthians 5:2.

³⁴⁰ "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." 2 Corinthians 5:8.

It need not surprise us that new light should come "so late in the day," as it were. I cannot help quoting here in this connection a statement made by Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) who said:³⁴¹

Hindrances in the way of acquiring natural and supernatural light and knowledge have been of the same kind. It is admitted that the whole scheme of Scripture is not yet understood: so if it ever comes to be understood before the restitution of all things and without miraculous interpositions, it must be in the same way that natural knowledge is arrived at, by the continuance and progress of learning *and liberty*, and by particular persons attending to, comparing, and pursuing intimations scattered up and down it which have been overlooked and disregarded by the generality of the world.

For this is the way all improvements are made, by thoughtful men tracing out obscure hints, as it were dropped for us by nature accidentally, or which seem to come into our minds by chance. *Nor is it at all incredible that a book which has been so long in the possession of mankind should contain many truths as yet undiscovered.* [Emphasis mine].

And so, at last, we come to the "resolution" so long promised in the preceding pages. . . .

➡ PROCEED



³⁴¹ Butler, Joseph, *Analogy of Religion*: as quoted by J. B. Heard, *The Tripartite Nature of Man*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1868, p.280.