



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 215

The intermediate state – In theology, the condition of a person between the times of physical death and the resurrection of the dead is often referred to as the intermediate state. Reformed theology teaches that upon death the souls of believers immediately enter into God’s presence. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares, “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies” (Chapter 32, Section 1).

The souls of believers immediately enter God’s presence – After physical death, the soul (or spirit) of a believer, separated from the body, immediately enters into God’s presence, into the glories of heaven (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4; Revelation 2:7). Paul talks about this state a number of times in his letters (2 Corinthians 5:1-8; Philippians 1:21-24). In these passages we see a contrast between the good and the better. With all its difficulties, trials, and sufferings, as Christians our life on this earth is a good life with many blessings and joys. Thus, Paul says “For me to live is Christ.” However, he also knew that while he lived on this earth he was away from the Lord, that is, the fullness of God’s glory and presence; and even though he knew that death would result in the separation of his soul from his body, his unclothing, he says that “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Thus, being in the presence of the Lord in heaven, the intermediate state, is “far better” than our lives now, for it will be far better to see our Lord face to face than simply by faith.

Beatific vision – For Christians the ultimate hope and supreme state of blessedness is to behold God (Exodus 33:18-23; Numbers 6:24-26). That is why the believers’ intermediate state is far better than this life, for we shall see God face to face! This in theology is referred to as the “beatific vision.” The word beatific comes from the Latin root “beatus” from which we also get the word “beatitude,” which means supreme blessedness. In His Sermon on the Mount, we find a section which is often referred to the beatitudes, where Christ pronounces various blessings upon people, beginning with the words “Blessed are” (Matthew 5:3-11). In verse 8 Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This blessing is realized in believers, who see God by faith; however, it is ultimately realized after death when they will see God face to face (Psalm 17:15; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

Souls made perfect in holiness – When we die our souls are immediately made perfect in holiness, where we will no longer experience temptation, suffering, and sorrow, where our battle with the devil, the world, and our remaining sinful nature will cease, and we will no longer fall into sin. Thus, our souls will be made morally perfect and holy, and in that sense our sanctification will be complete. In Hebrews 12:23 the author describes believers who have died as “the spirits of the righteous made perfect,” which refers to their separated souls made morally perfect and holy.

However, we need to mention here that even though the intermediate state, being in the presence of God in heaven and seeing Him face to face is far better than our life on this earth, still it is not the very best state, for it is not our final home. The supreme and most blessed state for the believer is the new heavens and the new earth, which will come to be at the resurrection of the dead at the return of Christ, where our souls will be reunited with our resurrected and glorified bodies. This will be our final state, our final home, when we will be fully glorified as embodied creatures, and thus we will be in the presence of the Lord, enjoying His unveiled glory forever and ever (Isaiah 65:17-25; Daniel 12:1-3; Matthew 13:43; 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 49, 53; Philippians 3:21; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 22:1-5). Thus, for believers the path is from good to far better, and then to the most blessed state.