

**Alderwood Community Church  
December 28, 2008**

**HEAVEN: What is it REALLY going to be like?**

Part 2- Understanding the Present Heaven, the Intermediate State  
2 Corinthians 5:6-10

**Intro:** The Apostle Paul considered it vital for us to know what happens when we die:  
*“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.”* 1 Thess. 4:13

**Read:** 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

**Three Primary Views of the Intermediate State (Present Heaven)**

**1. Purgatory**

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12575a.htm>) *“The doctrine of Purgatory (Lat., "purgare", to make clean, to purify) in accordance with Catholic teaching is a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are, not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions. That temporal punishment is due to sin, even after the sin itself has been pardoned by God, is clearly the teaching of Scripture.”* But the problem with this teaching on the temporal punishment for sin is that the Scripture does not teach this. The Scripture teaches us in 1 John 1:9 that *“If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

There are two primary problems with this view:

**A. Scripture makes no reference to “purgatory”.**

The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory is nowhere taught in Scripture. As a matter of fact the doctrine of Purgatory was not introduced until the Council of Florence in 1439 AD.

It was devised to accommodate Catholicism's denial of justification by faith alone. Here's why:

Scripture very clearly teaches that an absolutely perfect righteousness is necessary for entry into heaven. Jesus said, “I say unto you that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 5:20 He then added, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Matt. 5:48—thus setting the standard as high as it can possibly be set.

Later in His ministry, when the rich young ruler approached Jesus asking how he might enter heaven, Jesus upheld this same standard of absolute perfection. He began by declaring that *“there is none good but one, that is, God”* Matt. 19:17—not disclaiming sinless perfection for

Himself, but plainly pointing out that such perfection is impossible for sinful humanity. Then, however, Jesus told the young man that in order to obtain eternal life, he must have a track record of perfect obedience to the law (vv. 17–21). Again and again, He made the required standard of righteousness impossibly high for all who would seek to earn God’s favor on their own.

The young ruler clearly did not understand or acknowledge his own sinfulness. He assured Jesus that he had indeed kept the law from his youth up (v. 20).

Jesus subtly pointed out the young man’s covetousness, which was a violation of the Tenth Commandment. From the outset of His conversation with the young man, the Lord was prodding him to confess that no one but God Himself is truly *good*. But the rich young ruler was unwilling to face his own sin, and so he finally went away without salvation.

The disciples marveled at this. The young man was evidently—from the human perspective—one of the most righteous individuals they knew. Notice that no one disputed his claim that he had obeyed the law. There must have been no overt sins in his life that anyone could point to. He was the best of men. So the disciples were floored when he walked away with no assurance of eternal life from Jesus. In fact, Jesus told them, *“I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven.”* (v. 23).

Again, Jesus was setting the standard at an impossible height. He was saying that the most fastidious legal observance is not enough. The most flawless external righteousness is not enough. All the worldly advantages of wealth are of no help. Only absolute perfection is acceptable to God. Our Lord kept underscoring these things because he wanted people to see the utter futility of seeking to earn righteousness by any system of works.

The disciples got the message. They asked, *“Who then can be saved?”* (v. 25). And Jesus replied, *“With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible”* (v. 26).

We know from Paul’s treatise on justification in Romans 4 that God saves believers *by imputing to them the merit of Christ’s perfect righteousness*—not in any sense because of their own righteousness. God accepts believers *in Christ*. He clothes them with the perfect righteousness of Christ. He declares them perfectly righteous because of Christ. Their sins have been imputed to Christ, who has paid the full penalty. His righteousness is now imputed to them, and they receive the full merit for it. That is what justification by faith means.

Paul wrote, *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”* Romans 5:1-2

And, *“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Romans 8:1

These verses describe our justification as something already accomplished. They speak of it in the past tense. Jesus Himself described justification as an immediate event when He told how the repentant publican was saved after begging God for mercy: *“This man went down to his house*

*justified.*” Luke 18:14 Justification is thus a completed fact for the believer; it is not an ongoing process. We stand before God fully acceptable to Him because of Christ’s righteousness—not our own.

### **B. This Catholic theology is based on an incorrect view of justification.**

Roman Catholic doctrine denies all that. Catholicism teaches that justification is an ongoing process that depends on the degree of real, personal righteousness we achieve. According to official Catholic teaching, Christ’s merit imputed to us is not enough to save; we must earn merit of our own through the sacraments and other good works we do. Righteousness is infused into us, then perfected by our own efforts. According to Catholic teaching, this real, personal righteousness that resides in us is the necessary ground on which God accepts us. And our justification is not complete until we are perfect. This reverses the order, suggesting that we must *first* be perfected, and only *then* is our justification complete.

According to Catholic Catechism (note 1473) *“The forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin, but temporal punishment of sin remains. While patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death, the Christian must strive to accept this temporal punishment of sin as a grace. He should strive by works of mercy and charity, as well as by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the "old man" and to put on the "new man."*

The Catholic view of justification poses an obvious dilemma. We know too well that even the best Christians fall far short of perfection. No one (Catholic teaching actually says *almost* no one) achieves absolute perfection in this life. And if our own perfection is a prerequisite to heaven, it would seem no one could enter heaven immediately upon death. Any remaining imperfections would need to be worked out first.

The doctrine of purgatory is, therefore, necessary to solve this dilemma. Deny that we are justified by faith alone, and you must devise an explanation of how we can make the transition from our imperfect state in this life to the perfect state of heaven. Purgatory is where Roman Catholics believe most people go after death to be finally purged of their sins and gain whatever merit they may be lacking to enter heaven. Catholicism teaches that this will involve intense pain and suffering.

Oddly enough, although Catholic doctrine denies that the imputed righteousness of Christ is sufficient to save sinners in this life, it does allow the imputation of righteousness from earthly sinners to those in purgatory. Candles are lit, prayers are prayed, and Masses are said for the dead. Supposedly the righteousness earned via the sacrament is imputed to the person in purgatory, and that shortens his or her stay there.

But none of this is taught in Scripture. The sufferings of Christ were fully sufficient to atone for our sins. Our own sufferings can add nothing to the merit of Christ. For all believers, because we are fully justified, there can be no condemnation. No post-mortem suffering is necessary to atone for remaining sin; all our sins are covered by the blood of Christ.

## 2. Soul Sleep

Some theologians in the early church, a few others groups in succeeding centuries and today, especially the Seventh Day Adventists, hold the view that between death and the resurrection of the believers body, the soul sleeps, that is, it is without any consciousness whatsoever.

But all occurrences in the N.T. of the concept of sleep in relation to death have in mind not the sleep of the soul but of the body. Sleep is used in the New Testament as a synonym for physical death.

Jesus used the term “sleep” to describe Lazarus who had just died:

*“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”* John 11:11

Jesus also used the term to describe the condition of the daughter of a ruler who had died:

*“Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep.”* Matt. 9:24

Luke used the term “sleep” to describe Stephen who had been martyred for his faith.

*“Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them,’ When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there giving approval to his (Stephen’s) death.”*

Acts. 7:60-8:1

The Apostle Paul used the term to describe believers who had already died and whom will come be raised up with Jesus at the Rapture of the church.

*“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him”* 1 Thess. 4:14

The leading idea, intended to be suggested by the figurative view of death as “sleep”, seems plainly to mean “complete rest from labor, and freedom from suffering”.

That is why the Scriptures tell us in Revelation 14:13 *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”* This was the scripture that Mike Cosper sent me on my cell phone early in the morning just after his dad went to meet his Savior and enter into his rest from his labor and suffering.

If the N.T. teaches that a believer at the time of death enters immediately into the presence of his Lord, then soul sleep is out of the question and this is the conviction held by almost the entire Protestant church.

## 3. Immediate presence of God.

*“And the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”*  
Ecclesiastes 12:7

*“You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy one see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, and with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”* Psalms 16:10-11

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Psalm 23:6

“Then he (criminal on the cross next to Jesus) said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” Luke 23:42-43

“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord do hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this he fell asleep.” Acts 7:58-59

“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord...We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:6,8

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” Philippians 1:21-24

Conclusion: While we do not have all the answers about the Present Heaven (Intermediate state) of the believer, we do know:

**A. When we die and leave this earth we will be ushered into the very presence of God immediately and will be in His presence forever.**

Every reference in the book of Revelation to human beings talking and worshiping in Heaven prior to the resurrection of the dead demonstrates that our spiritual beings are conscious, not sleeping after death.

Westminster Confession of Faith, “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” (32.1).

**B. We will experience joy and pleasure in His presence.**

“You fill me with joy in your presence, and with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”

Psalm 16:11

God goes to great lengths to assure us of the gift of heaven.

John 14:2 “In my Father’s house are many rooms, if it were not so, I would have told you.”

Rev. 21:5 “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”

2 Cor. 5:5 “Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”

The Greek word for “*deposit*” is *arrabon*. In modern Greek a form of *arrabon* refers to an engagement ring. In New Testament times it referred to a down payment or first installment – earnest money. So, the Holy Spirit is a token of God’s pledge to us that even our bodies will be made new and imperishable in the glory of heaven.

John Quincy Adams, when asked late in life how he was doing replied: “John Quincy Adams is well, sir, very well. The house in which he has been living is dilapidated and old, and he has received word from it’s maker that he must vacate soon. But John Quincy Adams is well, sir, very well.”

**How are you doing?** What is your confidence of Heaven based on? Your own righteousness? Or the righteousness of Jesus Christ that comes by faith in Him? (Romans 5:1)

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