

Heaven and Hell: Part Two

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, in this episode, we're going to tackle part two of a four-part series on Heaven and hell. So if you haven't listened to the previous episode, I recommend you doing so, or else this is going to feel like a bolt out of the blue.

So this was a four-part lecture series that I did a number of years ago, bringing together lots of years of reading and reflecting on what the Bible is trying to tell us about these ideas of Heaven and hell and eternal life and eternal death. Most of these ideas aren't even mine—I just collected what I thought were a bunch of the best scholarship and thinking and observations, mixed with my own observations, and, kind of, synthesized it into these lectures.

In this part two, after exploring and really pondering Genesis 1 through 3, and its concepts of "human life" and "human death," what we're going to do in this lecture is, first of all, tackle the biblical word "heaven" or "heavens" and what that means—and what it doesn't mean.

And from there, we'll go on to tackle the language about "life and death" throughout the rest of the Bible. And what you'll see is—it's actually fairly clear—is that the biblical authors don't envision "life" or "death" as something—specifically "death"—they don't

imagine it as something that just “happens” to you at the end of your physical life—your body just giving out.

Rather, ever since page three of the Bible, both “life” and “death” are present *realities*. They’re “modes of existing” in the world. [Tim laughs] The concept of “zombies” is very much a biblical idea, of living in a state of death—the “living dead.” And so that language comes up in the letters of Paul in the New Testament, but it’s a deeply Jewish and Old Testament idea—of the “living dead.”

And so how pages one through three of the Bible then set the trajectory for our understandings of the word “heaven” and our understandings of “life” and “death” as modes of existing in the world, and how that helps us think about ideas of what happens after we die—and what Bible nerds call the “intermediate state”—what does the Bible say about the intermediate state? And not a whole lot, actually—but we’ll look at the handful of biblical texts that do talk about it, and then draw some conclusions, and then move on into other good stuff. So there you go. I hope this is helpful for you. I encourage you to get your Bible out and your notebook, whatever you want to do, and let’s dive in.

[Musical break (03:25–3:28)]

But one way to think about what human beings are made for—often we think of the idea of “heaven.” What’s “heaven” in the Bible? “Heaven” has two primary meanings in the Bible. Genesis 1, “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.” What are “the heavens” in Genesis 1? It’s what’s “up there,” right? It’s the sky, because birds go in the heavens—right?—later on in the story. So it’s what’s “up there.” So “heaven” is just the sky.

There’s also another way that the biblical authors use the word “Heaven,” and that’s referring to “God’s dimension.” So, you know, biblical authors didn’t know anything about quantum physics—neither do I. And I’m not sure that anyone who does know anything about quantum physics actually does really know about quantum physics, because it’s really difficult to comprehend, but whatever. [What] quantum physics tells us is that there is more to reality than meets the eye—that there are more dimensions of reality than we experience.

We live in four—that’s three—one, two, three. And then time is also related to space, as a dimension, whatever, you know? Go figure that out—some of you know what I’m talking about. And quantum physics has opened up to us that there are actually more

dimensions, but that we aren't made to inhabit [them, or we just don't interact with them in the way we exist in the world. But those dimensions are out there.

And in the biblical author's view, "heaven" is like a dimension. I think it's a helpful way to think about it, in terms of modern language. "Heaven" is the dimension of God's space. And often people think of Heaven—and they think of Heaven as God's space, and then they think of, whatever, "Earth" or "physical existence" as our space.

And occasionally, you know, God will do something to intervene and act—like, Exodus or miracles, or something like that—Jesus. This would be like the traditional view: when you die, that's about going to that space or going to some other space that's . . . and we're not quite sure how hell fits into this equation.

And this is not the way the biblical authors think about things. Biblical authors think about things this way: that originally Heaven—God's space—and our space completely overlapped and interlocked. You know, you read Genesis chapter 1, and you read the descriptions of the temple or the tabernacle, later on in the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Exodus and the book of First Kings.

And what kind of things were going on in the Israelite tabernacle or temple? Well, things like trees and rivers and cherubim—whatever those things are. They're not babies—they're not naked babies, that's for sure. [Tim laughs] They're, like, fearful serpent-like lion-creatures with wings that will kill you—that's what they are.

And the inside of the temple and the tabernacle was made to remind you of God's space. And that's how things are depicted in Genesis chapter 1. And so essentially, Genesis 1 gives us Heaven and Earth united. God's space and our space completely overlap. And what sin does is it brings in a schism between the two—between our space and God's space.

Is it a complete schism? No. God's space still overlaps with ours, and that's what the temple is—that's what the tabernacle is. If you have a divine-space "Geiger counter" in your head, the temple and tabernacle are where it starts to "beep" really loud, you know—like, "this is God's space."

But then, also, you read through the biblical narratives, and you can encounter God's space in surprising places, right? Jacob is out, like, traveling in the wilderness on the way from one town to the next—you know this story—Genesis, chapter 28? And he puts—he goes and sleeps, just, like, on the ground—puts his head on a rock, and he has this crazy dream. He encounters God. And what does he say at the end of his dream? He says, "This—this is God's space right here." Moses and the burning bush, and so on.

And what's, essentially, what Jesus comes and says is that he is the embodiment of this overlap. And what he's doing is—what he accomplishes is returning creation back to its original state. Not the schism, created by sin. But this interlocked and interwoven—of God's space and our space.

The story of the Bible ends saying? The story of the Bible does *not* end with a bunch of people going to God's space, right? The story of the Bible ends with God's space coming to our space, right? And that's the image of Jerusalem—the place where the temple, God's presence, was—coming down to earth—“the dwelling of God is with humanity,” and so on. And so this is directly relevant to our conceptions of Heaven and hell. The Bible is just offering us a whole different framework that many of us are, kind of, unfamiliar with.

And so Jesus comes onto the scene and—as *the* overlap. In fact, what does Jesus think about the temple—the Jewish temple—as a place where God's space and our space were supposed to overlap? And he says: through sin—through Israel's rebellion and corruption—the temple is now just a sham. It's being used for all sorts of political, national ends for Israel. It's no longer the dwelling place of God.

Jesus says, “One greater than the temple is here”—by which he means himself. He is the living, breathing example of God's space and our space overlapping. And he's returning it back to its original state. And so that's a good segue for talking about what Christ does to conquer sin and destroy death.

Now this could be a whole night that we spend on talking about, just, the identity of Jesus: who he is, what he came to do, and so on. I'm just bringing up some biblical passages that touch on the themes of “sin” and “death,” and “Heaven” and “hell.”

And so the author of Hebrews has a very high view of Jesus—actually, the whole New Testament does—the author of Hebrews just really articulates and talks about it a lot. And he's convinced that Jesus is the—ooh, ooh, ooh, what? I just didn't even think about that, but that's a good one.

Okay, so: [Referencing Hebrews 1:1] “God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers and the prophets in many portions and in many ways”—you guys know the King James here? This is great. In “divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers.” [Tim laughs] So this is like etiquette for deep-sea divers—something like that—“diver's manners,” right?

No, no—this is King James. This is 1611-speak, “divers manners.” Namely, NIV: “at many times, in various ways.” That's a good way. Okay, all right. So “in the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets many times in various ways, but in these last days, he's spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through

whom he made the universe. The son is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his being."

This is language and ideas borrowed from Genesis, chapter 1. What are human beings? We're "image-bearers." We too are supposed to be images and representations of God's being. Are we? Did we end up doing so? No, we were given a choice, and through rebellion and selfishness, we forfeited—and the image and the representation became marred and broken.

But Jesus comes as *the true* representative. He comes as *the* image of God. So in chapter 2—this is his way of getting at the problem of sin and death—God himself, kind of, weaves himself into the story.

So the verses here that I've highlighted, "Because God's children are human beings, made of flesh and blood, the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying."

So what he's saying here is that death—this is the idea—he's been reading Genesis 3—death is not originally what God wanted for human beings. It's a result of our sin and rebellion and mistrust. And his death and all the facets, all the profound ways that death is unpacked, there, in Genesis 3.

And so what does God do? He comes among us as a human being and experiences death—tastes death—on our behalf. By raising from the dead, he breaks the power of death. In other words, Jesus's death and resurrection are precisely the way that God deals with the problem of sin and death.

Jesus absorbs sin and its cause, death, into himself. He breaks its power. And he offers us freedom. So we have the image of "slavery" and "freedom" here. So this is unpacking the storyline of the Gospel here. But this is how the Gospel addresses the sin-death connection here. So through his death, he breaks the power of death. Through his resurrection, he conquers sin and death and offers us life.

Romans, chapter 6: "For we died and were buried with Christ"—okay, let's just pause real quick here, right? Stop right here. Let's just say we didn't have those last two words there: "We died and were buried with Christ." Really? Really? So if you're a follower of Jesus, you're like, "News to me. Like, I haven't been in a tomb lately. I haven't been out of a tomb lately." What is this talking about here?

This is the crucial symbol of *baptism* here—it's *through* baptism and the Spirit's working in our lives that we die with Jesus and are raised with Jesus. His story becomes our story through baptism. "Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of

the Father, now we may also live new lives. Since we've been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was."

Does he say, "Since we've been united with him in his death, we will go to heaven forever after we die?" *No*. What is the planned future for human beings, and for Christ-followers specifically? What should our real hope be in? *Resurrection*. Resurrection, okay?

So this is tricky, because in moments of grief and in moments of death—and when you're counseling, you're with people and so on, you know? For someone who's a follower of Jesus, their greatest hope is that, at this moment, they are with Christ in Heaven. It's an incredible hope that transforms grief.

But at the same time, I think—because in a moment of grieving, in a moment of grieving, that's often, kind of, all that's said. For, just, somehow, in the Christian imagination—modern Christian imagination—that has become the end of the story: going to heaven after you die. And you read through the New Testament, and you *don't* find that language anywhere. What you find them talking about is "our hope is resurrection"—physical re-embodiment.

So we've been "united with him in his death; we will be raised to life as he was. We know that our old, sinful humanity was crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives"—did you know this? Did you know this?

So again, this is the tension, because—really? Because "Man, I just totally bit that person's head off at work, and you're telling me my sinful nature is crucified and died, really? Really?" And Paul says, "Yes. You just aren't living into your true identity. You've forgotten who you are . . . when you bite someone's head off at work. You're not truly living as who you are.

"We are no longer slaves to sin"—and some of us are like, "News to me." But that's what Paul's saying here. So Paul never holds—when he's talking about ethics and right and wrong choices—he never wields a hammer of authority and uses "hell" as some sort of, like, motivation to get people to do the right thing.

To get people—to motivate them to do the right thing—Paul always appeals to their understanding of their true identity: "Remember who you are." For Paul, that's the motivation: "You're destined for resurrection. What are you doing biting someone's head off at work?" Schizophrenia is what it is—you're living as if you're two different people. Don't do that. Don't do that. I'm going to start preaching here.

So verse 7, "When we died with Christ, we were set free from the power of sin. Since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead. He will never die again. Death no longer has any

power over him. When he died, he died once to break the power of sin, but now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God.”

So this is the idea here, it's: Jesus *breaks* the power of sin and death. And that's the gift that he offers to us. And you may think, “Well, I sure don't feel like that.” But Paul says, “Yes, you are dead to sin. You're not a sinner.” You're like, “I totally am.” And Paul says, “No, you just have moments of relapse—or you forget your true identity. Your destiny is for resurrection.” So do you see the connection between sin and death here, from Genesis 3, and between Jesus's death and resurrection? Our future is for resurrection.

Okay, so check this out then. What this means is: that if our future is for resurrection—if I'm a follower of Jesus, Jesus absorbs living death for me into himself, and he gives me a whole new trajectory. Now Paul is saying, “You *are* resurrected—alive from the dead.” Now in this timeline, where does that happen in the biblical story? It happens here [referring to visual], but Paul is saying, “No, no, no, no, no. You *have* died, and you *have* been raised from the dead already.” Do you see that? That's what he said, there in Romans 6: “You died and were buried. Christ was raised from the dead. We live in a new kind of humanity that's connected to Christ's resurrection.”

So you get a passage like—sorry, this is freestyling—it's just coming to me—but Paul says, Ephesians chapter 2, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy”—has done what? “He made us alive from the dead.”

Wait, no—the resurrection is—sorry, too many screens going on here [laughing at visuals]—the resurrection is out here. And Paul says, “No, no, no. The resurrection actually begins the *moment* that you repent and that you receive the gift of grace and life through Christ. *That's* when resurrection life begins. Physical resurrection will come *here*, but your spiritual, relational resurrection is happening right now.”

So here's the idea: eternal life, resurrection, or death and the grave—these are not just future, end-of-the-game realities. These are *present* realities for our identity right now.

So a few passages here—these are on your handout right here. Eternal life and eternal death are present realities that set you on a track, set you on a trajectory. So in John, chapter 5, Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life”—will have eternal life?—“*has* eternal life, will not be condemned. He *has* crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”

Now, verse 25—this is very tricky here. Is Jesus talking—which moment is Jesus talking about? This moment right here [referring to visuals]? Or this moment right *here*? Let's read again, verse 25—sorry: “I tell you the truth, a time is coming, but has now already come, when the dead”—who are “the dead”? Right, exactly right—so “the dead” are the

physically dead, but “the dead” are also the spiritual—the zombies, the *living dead*—“will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. As the Father has life in himself, he’s granted the Son to have life in himself. He’s given him authority to judge because he’s the Son of Man. Don’t be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice.”

Now which resurrection is he talking about now? This one right here [referring to visual]. “They will hear his voice and they will come out. Those who have done good will rise to live. Those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” The resurrection is for whom? For everybody. It’s for everybody.

John 17—this is right before Jesus’s last night with his followers is over. He’s about to be arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. He says, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that the Son may glorify you. You have granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. This is eternal life—going to heaven forever and playing harps on a cloud.” [Tim laughs] Okay, no, no. What is eternal life? “To *know you*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

How do you *know* the one, true God? By knowing Jesus Christ, right? Wait, I thought . . . if you know Jesus Christ, then . . . I thought . . . God and Jesus Christ, I mean, they’re two separate people here, right? What does Jesus say? He says, “No, if you know the true God, you know me. If you know me, you know the Father, because I’m”—okay, so explain that one to your kids, right? [Tim laughs] I don’t know.

So that’s what Jesus is saying: “If you know me, you know the one, true God. This is eternal life.” So it’s the *healing* of that relational death—of spiritual death—between humans and the creator. So this is the healing of that schism—that relational schism, in Genesis chapter three. Eternal life is something that begins *now*. It’s a quality of life that sets you on a trajectory for the new creation.

Paul the Apostle, he has different ways of getting at this idea. He says, “For he”—Jesus —“has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and he’s brought us into the kingdom of the Son whom he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.” So in Paul’s language, he doesn’t use the “living death” or zombies or whatever. What does he describe—this is in Colossians, chapter one? How does he describe this, right here? “A kingdom . . . a kingdom of darkness.” Darkness—very powerful image.

And we’ve been rescued out of this kingdom and transferred into what? “Into the kingdom of the Son.” So this is the kingdom of the Son. Now, what was the original vocation and calling of human beings? To rule and to reign—royal imagery here. So “the kingdom of the Son”—restored to our original vocation, okay?

Ephesians—we’ve already read the first couple of verses here—but we’ll see it again: “You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked, according to

the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirits working in those who are disobedient. Because of his great love for us, God, who's rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were 'zombies'—the living dead [Tim paraphrasing] in transgression. It's by grace you've been saved. God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ."

So has that happened to you yet? Have you had that heavenly vision, whatever—you know? And some of you are like, "No, I did acid in college and I, maybe, had that kind of experience—but that was not . . ." you know? No, no—that's not it—that's not it.

So what Paul is saying is [that] our true identity is in Heaven. Does that mean that our home is in Heaven, and that's where we're going? Where is Jesus right now? So you have got to get this out of your head—get this out of your head, right?

Heaven and Earth used to be like this. Sin brought the schism. Jesus Christ is now the meeting place of Heaven and Earth. If you are known and have relational healing with Jesus, you now live in a state where—yes, we're living on earth—but where are you also living, as we live here on Earth? We're in Heaven, so to speak.

And Paul's not—he's not using, you know—playing "double speak," or something like that. He really means what he's saying. Heaven is an experience that can be present now. It's not somewhere you go—just somewhere you go after you die. It's a *present* reality. Eternal life is a *present* reality. You can experience resurrection power in the present. And he describes it as "life transformation."

So, you know, I don't know—hang around someone who's been healed of a drug addiction—substance addiction of some kind, because of what God's grace is up to in their lives; that's resurrection power. Be around people who have had healed marriages; they thought for *sure* this was the end. And God's grace does something to humble them and give them a new passion and commitment for each other. It's resurrection; it's resurrection power.

The power to say "no" to that dark, secret temptation that's had you imprisoned your entire life. The power to finally get over that, and to grow as a follower of Jesus—Paul says that's "resurrection power." Do you see what I'm saying here? This is—when you do that, you're participating . . . It's a small, little taste of this full reunion—of all of my life and existence—in harmony, reconnected back with God. That's the idea here.

So Heaven and hell—they're future realities, but they're present—they begin in the present. That's what I'm getting at with this drawing here. This is, I think, one of the most important things for us to hear, as twenty-first-century Westerners, because we've mostly just forgotten that the New Testament is talking like this. Or we screen it out—we just, I don't know. Somehow, none of us grew up hearing this. I don't know why—it's just like, "read the pages," you know?

But we've somehow—we've gotten this idea of Heaven and hell, and of God's space and our space, and it's just *not* what the Bible's saying. Heaven and hell are present realities. Sin and death, eternal life and resurrection life, are present realities. It'd be a good sermon, wouldn't it? There you go. Okay. I guess it's a sermon right now. Here we go. How 'you guys doing—are you tracking with me? Give me nods of affirmation if you understand what we're saying here.

I believe this truth has incredible power—to change people—to change people. This is not just “pie in the sky.” People who think that Heaven is “pie in the sky” and who reject Christianity because they think it's “pie in the sky”—you need to find a way to help them see they've rejected something other than Christianity. They've rejected some fusion of Bible and Greek philosophy, and twenty-first-century American culture, and all this kind of stuff. So this is what the Bible's saying.

Okay, we've got to keep going, or else we're not going to make it through the notes. All right, okay, so here we go.

This is what's happening before physical death: Heaven and hell, eternal life, eternal death: they're present realities. But physical death—something does happen. There is this schism—because we live in a fallen, broken world—there is a schism [between] our material and immaterial. It's not what we're made for—it's temporary. It's “the intermediate state.” But there is this reality right here.

And the Bible does talk about it, though not a whole lot. So let's just make clear what we're talking about here. The theological term is “the intermediate state.” The popular culture term is “life after death.” This is, in the Bible's view, the *temporary* state of existence between our physical death and our physical resurrection.

You don't stop existing after your physical death and before your physical resurrection. Some part of you—the immaterial part of you—lives on. What is this? Okay, so the Bible's language to talk about this in the Old Testament is the word *she'ol*. In the New Testament Greek, it's the word *hades*, or hades. Sometimes we get the word in our English Bibles. It just means “grave”—the grave, the tomb. And all of the dead, in the Hebrew Bible, everybody—righteous, wicked—everybody goes to *she'ol*.

So Jacob, sinner? Saint? Jacob? [Tim laughs] Holy cow, he's like—he's such a screw-up—holy cow. But God has incredible grace on him. All of Jacob's sons and his daughters come to comfort him because he thinks Joseph, his son, is dead: “Jacob refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘in mourning, I will go down to *she'ol*, to my son’”—“my son just died—he's in *she'ol*—I'm going to die in mourning, go down and meet my son in *she'ol*.’ So his father wept for him.”

Whenever you hear *she'ol*, or “the grave,” being talked about, especially in the Hebrew Bible—there you go. That's that. Everybody's in *she'ol*, and the righteous and the

wicked. And what's more—what's beyond that—the Hebrew Bible gives us a tiny, little glimpse here—we'll see a few in a few minutes, but that's where it goes.

We get to the New Testament, and you are looking at the three passages in the Bible that clearly seem to tell what happens to a follower of Jesus after death. There's only three, and you're looking at them—you're looking at them.

Luke 23, "Then he said"—[Tim laughs] I just "cut and pasted" this out . . . Who said? The other thief on the cross, next to Jesus. This is the other guy hanging next to Jesus. The guy hanging next to Jesus said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in *paradise*."

"Paradise"—we'll do this here. "Paradise" is a Greek word—*para* [writing word]—all caps—*paradeisos* is the Greek word. And it's the word for, literally, it's the word for "garden." And so in Judaism, in the New Testament—what is "Heaven"? So "Heaven" is the place where—it's "God's space." In the story of the Bible, where was the perfect union of God's space and our space? Right, it was right *here*.

And so Jesus says, "Today you'll be with me in God's space." So it's again, "in the garden"—in the garden. That's what Jesus says here: "in God's presence." So "give us more—unpack that for us, Jesus." Nope—"I'm on a cross." [Audience laughs] You know what I mean? I'm sorry—I may be blasphemous, I don't know. [Tim laughs] You've got to watch what you say here—so, right? So he doesn't say—it doesn't give us more detail. That's all he says.

This is a word of hope—yes—hope? *Powerful* hope. Does it give us all the information we want? No. This is very important for us to get when it comes to the Bible. So the Bible does not exist to answer our theological questions. It exists to tell us the story about what God is doing about the problem of evil, sin, and death in our world through Jesus. And if it *happens* to answer some of *our* questions that we come to the Bible with . . . *wonderful*. Right? And that's often the problem when it comes to this here. Anyway, so that's Luke 23.

The other two statements about the "intermediate state" for believers belong to the Apostle Paul—so Philippians 1. Paul's in prison. He doesn't know if he's going to make it out of prison alive. He says, "I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ as I have in the past. I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live, whether I die. For to me, living means living for Christ"—or some of you know it . . . what is that verse—21? Yeah, you know it in the NIV: "For me to live *is* Christ, and to die is gain."

What kind of *lunatic* thinks that their death is a step forward for them? A follower of Jesus—a follower of Jesus. So is it a step forward because death is a good thing?

What's more important is that we get what the Bible is trying to say—not that we make it say something that we want to make it say, but it doesn't actually say.

Is death “good” in the Bible? Is death our friend in the Bible? You need to have a quick answer to this as a follower of Jesus. *No*—death is an *enemy* for humans. It's an enemy and an invader in God's world, in its full-orbed meaning—not just biological death—its full-orbed meaning. It's an “alien invader” in God's world. It's not what we're made for.

But that's not what Paul is talking about. He says [Tim paraphrasing for Paul], “Prison or being with Christ? Let me choose, right? So ‘living’ means ‘living for Christ.’ Dying is even better. But if I live, I can still do more fruitful work for Christ. I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between the two desires. I long to go and be with Christ—be far better for me. But for your sakes—the Philippians and the early churches—it's better that I continue to live.”

In the context, Paul says, “death is better.” He's in prison, for goodness sake—you know what I'm saying? And he wants to be with Christ. But you have to read this in the larger context of what he's saying. In just two more chapters, he's going to say, “Jesus is going to return and transform our lowly bodies into his glorious body.” And is Paul excited about that hope? *Yes*—yes. And so in that sense, is death “good”? *No*, death is not good. *Resurrection* is good. Resurrection is good. “Death” is this painful transition to be with Christ, and then it's good—and then it's even *best*, because it's resurrection. It's what we're made for.

I guess what I'm getting at here is: there is this idea—it's become kind of popular in Christian culture that, like, “Death is not a big deal. Death is your ‘friend’, because it ushers you into the ‘God space,’” or something like that. And you know, you read Paul's discussions of “death” in terms of the theology of death: *it's an enemy*. It's *not* good. It's an invader in God's world. It has no power over followers of Jesus, but it's not good. It's not good. Anyhow, okay—so there you see, “to be with Christ.”

In Second Corinthians, chapter 5, “therefore we are always confident. As long as we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him whether we are at home in the body or away from it.”

Now again, you read these verses, just, isolated, by themselves, out of context—and you say, “Oh, I'm away from home right now, right? So I'm in my body . . . so I'm not . . .? So where is my home?” And then we import this framework into what Paul was saying and say, “Oh, my home is in some ‘non-physical place’ on a cloud or something, being with Jesus.” No, no, no. Hold on. Read the whole passage *in context*. Read it in light of the whole story of the Bible.

So we are away from the Lord right now—we are away from our home. But is our home sitting on a cloud forever? Is that what our destiny is? No, our destiny is to return with Christ and be physically embodied again in resurrection. So in terms of “intermediate state,” though, there you go—this is about what the Bible has to say about it.

What about for those who aren’t believers? Who don’t belong to Christ? Scripture doesn’t describe the existence of people who aren’t followers of Jesus or—whatever—who rejected God, rejected God’s grace. The only language used to describe where they’re at or what they’re doing is *hades*. The grave—the grave.

So Revelation 20—this is right before the large . . . resurrection, at the end of the story, “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. The books were open. Another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death and *hades*”—what does *hades* mean?—“and the *grave* gave up the dead that were in them. Each person was judged according to what they had done.”

If you’re not with Christ, where are you? “In the grave.” *No, we want to know more. We want to know more.* The Bible does describe most of what we associate—the language or descriptions—of hell, or of the final, eternal separation from God or whatever, are describing this, right here: all we get is “the grave.” And that’s it. There’s a few different views on what is going on in the intermediate state: *Are you conscious? Are you not?* Or whatever. So this is just, kind of, a few views and biblical passages that are relevant.

One view is that whatever that immaterial part of you is, it’s a conscious state of existence. And really, you know, you have Paul’s statements of being with Christ—and apparently he’s *aware* that he’s going to be with Christ, so there’s some kind of consciousness there.

There’s also—again, Revelation is an extremely, extremely difficult book to interpret. It’s full of Jewish apocalyptic symbolism and imagery and so on—but it has the only relevant passage to this here.

So John—the vision—he sees into God’s space, and he sees “under the altar.” God’s space is depicted as if it were, like, the Israelite temple, but up in God’s space. So under the altar—which is the altar of offering that’s in the first court of the temple—“I saw under the altar the *souls* of those who had been martyred for the word of God, for being faithful to their testimony. They shouted to the Lord and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?’” Does it sound like they’re conscious? White robes are given to each of them. They’re told “Rest; wait a little longer until the full number of brothers and sisters—other martyrs—has joined them.”

The Book of Revelation, first and foremost, is literature produced by and for the persecuted church. So we mostly forget that when we turn to the Book of Revelation, especially in the last 100 years or so in American culture. It's a book that was by and for the persecuted church.

So people who are not being persecuted and whose highest value is the liberty and freedom of the individual have real problems with reading the book of Revelation, because it's full of wrath and war and violence and so on. But if your house, if your family members, have been killed by people who are intent on destroying your life because you're a follower of Jesus, the game changes and the book of Revelation becomes, really, a powerful word of hope. Anyhow—okay, that's a different sermon. There you go: they're in a conscious state.

Another view—it's very common—is called “soul sleep.” And it's the idea that, basically, the intermediate state, just—you're not conscious, you're “asleep,” as it were. So, you know, some of you, you go to sleep—oh man, a full night of sleep. I can't even imagine.

So before Roman came into the world, I went to sleep, and then I just woke up and then, you know, six hours, seven hours have passed like that [Tim snaps fingers]—that's the idea. And it's because “sleep” is often a common metaphor for “death.”

So in John, chapter 11, Jesus says to the disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.” Now you, the reader, know what has actually happened. He says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm going to go wake him up.” The disciples said, “Well, Lord, if he's sleeping, he's probably going to get better soon.”

And then John, the author, whispers in our ear—he says, “They thought he meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died,” as if you needed the clarification, right? So “sleep” is a common metaphor for “death.” It doesn't seem like it's a literal description of the intermediate state.

One that I'll mention here: purgatory. Purgatory—it has a long history and shape in Catholic tradition. It's the idea that those who were baptized—that's the “password”—baptized, but who haven't been faithful followers of Christ, or whatever . . . so you're going to be in God's space, eventually, because you had “said the password,” but you're still compromised by sin in some way. In purgatory, you begin life, not really as a place or descriptions of it, but as a process. These people still need to be in a process of refinement and purification, and so on.

And one of the main texts that the early theologians, who formed this doctrine, turned to was actually not a text in the Hebrew Bible or in the Christian Bible. It was a book in a collection called the Apocrypha, which was widely read in the early church but wasn't appealed to as Scripture. And so there's a passage in a book called *Second Maccabees* that talks about this.

The bottom line—and this is a standard, kind of, Protestant position—is that purgatory—the idea that followers of Jesus, who come into God’s presence broken and not fully perfect and still need to, like, “work off” their sins, or whatever—does this “smell” like the Gospel to you? *No*—no. The whole point of the Gospel is that Jesus's death *completely* deals with our failure and with our sin.

And so purgatory, in a certain sense, assumes that Jesus's death and resurrection were not powerful enough to qualify you to be in God’s space. So that’s kind of my main problem with it—not to mention that it’s not explicitly talked about anywhere in the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Bible. So that’s my, like, three-second thing on purgatory.

So in terms of the views, I kind of land *here* because Paul and the book of Revelation seem to depict a conscious state of existence with Christ. And for those who aren’t followers of Christ, the grave. That’s “the intermediate state.”

[EMSB theme fades in]

Okay, we’re taking another pause. There are two more lectures to go in this series. We’re going to tackle them: the idea of God’s “judgment” and then the eternal existence of death and the existence of new creation and eternal life—what do these concepts mean, flowing out of the story, as we’ve explored it so far?

So there you go. You guys, thanks for listening. If “Exploring My Strange Bible” is a helpful podcast for you and you want to give it some love and support, feel free to go to iTunes and write down a little blurb—give it a one-to-five star rating, and cheers; that would be helpful for—not just for me, but actually for other people, if you want other people to hear about it. So we’ll see you next time. Thanks for listening.

[EMSB theme fades out]