

Intermediate State: *What Happens After We Die?*

D. Gene Williams Jr., PhD
Defend the Word Ministries
NorthPointe Church

INTRODUCTION

What happens to us between the time we die and the final resurrection? Christians have debated this for centuries. Different groups—Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox—have varying views on what takes place in this period, which we call the intermediate state. This paper explores these perspectives, especially how they deal with sanctification (becoming holy) and judgment.

SANCTIFICATION AND JUDGMENT: THE JOURNEY TO FINAL PERFECTION

1. Understanding Sanctification

- **Protestants** often believe that when we die, we are made perfect immediately because of our faith in Jesus. However, I argue that sanctification, or the process of being made holy, continues even after death. This idea comes from the biblical imagery of the bema seat, where believers' works are tested and refined, not to punish but to purify.
- **Catholics** believe in purgatory—a place where believers are purified of sins before entering heaven. Prayers from the living can help souls in purgatory.
- **Orthodox Christians** talk about *theosis* which means becoming united with God. They see the journey to holiness as continuing beyond death, supported by prayers and spiritual growth.

2. Justification, Sanctification, and Glorification

- Our salvation journey has three parts: justification (being declared right with God when we believe), sanctification (growing in holiness), and glorification (being made perfect at the resurrection). Although some think sanctification ends at death, Scripture suggests it might continue, refining us until we are fully like Christ.

3. Judgment: Refining, Not Punishing

- Protestants believe in the bema seat judgment, where our actions are tested by God's. This judgment does not condemn believers but burns away what is unworthy. It's like refining gold—only what is pure remains. So, even though we are saved by faith, our journey to holiness continues.

4. Catholic View: Purgatory

- Catholics hold that believers not yet pure undergo cleansing in purgatory. This idea comes from the belief that nothing unclean can enter heaven. Prayers and Masses from loved ones help the departed in this process.

5. Orthodox Perspective: Theosis

- Orthodox Christians view sanctification as part of becoming more like God. After death, souls continue to grow toward God, supported by the prayers of the faithful. This path may involve spiritual testing but leads toward full union with God.

6. The Final Judgment

- The Great White Throne Judgment is the last judgment for all people, as described in Revelation. Believers are vindicated (shown to be right) through

Christ, while those who reject God face separation. This judgment shows God's fairness and mercy, bringing ultimate justice.

CONCLUSION

The intermediate state isn't just a waiting room. It's a time of purification, sanctification, and preparation for eternal life. Whether we view it through the lens of the bema seat, purgatory, or theosis, God's purpose is the same: to make us fully holy and ready for perfect joy and communion with Him. Salvation is a journey, not just a legal declaration, and it continues until we are united with God forever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Source

The Holy Bible. *English Standard Version*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001.

Secondary Source

Ancient Faith. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com>.

Barry Kowald. *Death and the Intermediate State: Comparison of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Doctrinal Views*. Academia.edu, 2014.

BibleChat.ai. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://biblechat.ai>.

Bible Outlines. 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://www.bibleoutlines.com>.

Catholic Answers Staff. *Catholic Answers*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://www.catholic.com>.

Catholic365. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://catholic365.com>.

David Jeremiah. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://davidjeremiah.org>.

Douglas Woolley. *Salvation: The Roman Catholic View and the Orthodox Protestant View*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://douglaswoolley.com>.

GotQuestions.org. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://gotquestions.org>.

Living Room Theology. *Living Room Theology*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://livingroomtheology.com>.

OrthodoxWiki. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://orthodoxwiki.org>.

Sam Storms. *Individual Eschatology: Death, the Intermediate State, Resurrection*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://samstorms.org>.

Spiritual Culture. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://spiritualculture.org>.

Tabletalk Magazine. *Tabletalk Magazine*. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://tabletalkmagazine.com>.

Truglia, Craig. *Orthodox Christian Theology*, 2017.