

WAITING FOR THE RESURRECTION

by Joel Biermann

THE GREAT HOPE OF THE CHRISTIAN is not someday to die and go to heaven. No, the Christian hope is the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns in glory and brings to fulfillment all of God's plans for His creation. The Bible has much to say about this Day of Resurrection (1 CORINTHIANS 15 being a singular example) but not much to say about what happens between that wonderful, final day and the day that a believer dies (1 THESS. 4:13-18 talks about those who have "fallen asleep," but the focus is on the Last Day). Theologians call the time between death and resurrection the interim state.

Careful theologians are hesitant to say too much about the interim state simply because Scripture says little about it. The key is to distinguish what is actually revealed from what has become pious legend or sentimental conjecture.

Do those who have died in Christ watch over us or know what we're doing? Are they asleep? None of the above?

Faithful believers readily admit what they don't know.



What has been revealed

Humans are created as both body and soul (GEN. 2:7). Death tears apart the whole person. It is never a "good" thing, but it is the wages of sin. Yet, for the believer, death comes with a promise: It is not the end, and there will be a resurrection of the body and a re-making of each human person into all that God created that person to be. That will happen on the Day of Resurrection. Until that day, the soul — the immaterial part of each Christian that dies — experiences peace and rest abiding in the presence of God (PHIL. 1:21-24). The body, of course, also rests "in the earth"; both soul and body await the Last Day, the day of reunion and glorification.

The interim state is not a period of refining or purging. All sin was fully atoned at Calvary.

The interim state is certainly not unpleasant, but neither is it the final state or goal. Those who have died and now await the Resurrection have no responsibility for, or control over, people or events in this world. There is no certainty that they are even aware of events and people in this world.

So, while we may experience the warmth of love when we recall departed saints dear to us, those saints are not “watching over us”; they are enjoying rest from their labors. Perhaps it is like the rest of being with others, enjoying hors d’oeuvres before a banquet; or maybe it is like the rest that comes during the Divine Service; or maybe it is more like the rest of stretching out on a luxurious bed. The Bible offers hints that could point in all these directions (LUKE 23:43 and 2 KINGS 22:20 offer two contrasting thoughts).

Soul sleep

Some theologians strongly reject the idea of a soul sleep — the thought that those who die in faith simply “sleep” in a blissful state until the Day of Resurrection. They insist that because Scripture indicates that the dead enjoy God’s presence, these saints must be fully aware. Others, including Luther, are less adamant about this. Anyone who enjoys a wonderful night’s sleep after a long day of labor may be inclined to agree with the idea that a soul sleep is not inherently at odds with the enjoyment of God. And sleep does not necessarily imply a complete lack of consciousness or awareness.

Faithful believers readily admit what they don’t know. There is much about the interim state that is not known. Rather than speculate about what is unclear, perhaps our thoughts should center on what has been revealed. What is clearly known is what will happen when our Lord returns, and Christians are wise to focus hope and attention there. What happens between death and that day pales in comparison. Perhaps best of all is to leave our curiosity about the interim state where we leave the souls of the saints: in the hands of our loving Lord. **LW**

.....
The Rev. Dr. Joel Biermann (biermannj@csf.edu) is the Waldemar A. and June Schuette Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

