

The Layover

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Philippians 1:19-26

Today I want to start our sermon by talking about an experience that I had at one point in my life that many of you have probably also had as well. When I was living in Zimbabwe, there came a time when I needed to take about a two week trip to return to my hometown of Wichita, Kansas. My parents were having their 50th wedding anniversary, and my grandmother was turning 100, so they decided to combine and have one big party. They asked if I could fly in from Africa for a visit. While I was on my flight, I had a layover hard to imagine. There are no direct flights from Harare, Zimbabwe to Wichita, Kansas, so I had a layover in Johannesburg, South Africa, a layover of about 12 hours.

Now here's the thing: Some of you have probably had long layovers like that and hated them! You probably saw them as a waste of time and very frustrating! But for me, that layover was great! For one thing, it was in many ways better than the place I had come from. Don't get me wrong. Zimbabwe had its good points, but at the time things in Zimbabwe were tough. You could hardly find food in the grocery stores, and the Johannesburg airport had all these places you could eat and get snacks and ice cream! It was wonderful! The Johannesburg airport was also air-conditioned. We didn't have that in Zimbabwe. The restrooms in the Johannesburg airport were clean. Enough said about that! But suffice it to say, the layover was in a better place!

The layover was also a place of rest for me. I had spent the whole week before I left packing and trying to get ready to go, so I was exhausted. But here at the airport, I could sack out and get some rest! I found a quiet corner and got several hours of sleep, so I could stay awake for the whole 18 hour flight to America! So the layover was great! It was necessary to get me where I was going. It was better than where I came from, and it was a place of rest for me.

But here's the thing: As is true of any layover, it wasn't my destination. At no time was I under the delusion that the Johannesburg airport was my final destination. In fact, I don't know anyone that's ever taken a flight just for the layover! It's nice, but it's just a layover.

Today we are continuing in our study of Heaven called "I'll Fly Away." Today we are going to talk about a layover, a layover that we are all going to take if we die before Jesus returns, a layover our loved ones have all taken if they have passed away, a layover that is necessary and restful and even better than the place we came from, but a layover that is NOT our final destination. We're going to talk about that layover today. There's not a lot of information about it in Scripture, but there is some. As we talk about it today, we're going to do three things:

- Talk about the fact of the layover and how that relates to our final destination.
- Look at the quality of the layover. Look at one passage that shows us the most important fact about this layover.

- See what we can and can't know about the layover.

Here's my prayer today: It's that our view of heaven would begin to become clearer and that you would be comforted and encouraged by what will happen to you immediately after you die and by what has happened to your loved ones who have died. That's my prayer.

There's not a lot of information about this in the Bible. We'll see that there is a handful of passages that tell us a little about it. As I've said before, this is a topical study, meaning that my sermons aren't just going to camp out on one passage. But there is one passage that we will look at in a little bit of detail, and I want to read that to you as we start our sermon.

It's in the book of Philippians. The church at Philippi was a church Paul planted on his second missionary journey. It was a church that was near and dear to his heart. As he writes this passage, we are going to read Paul is probably in Rome, and he is on trial for his life. At the end of this trial, Paul will either be exonerated and released or he will be executed. The Philippians who also cared deeply about Paul are asking how he feels about all this. Paul's answer (shockingly!) is that he's rejoicing. He's rejoicing because the gospel has been spread, as he's moved from one trial to another. He's going to give them another reason. He's rejoicing in Philippians 1:19-26. Listen to what he says there. Paul speaking says this:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 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 the 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. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

- Philippians 1:19-26

If you were here for last week's sermon, I told you that I would share with you today the one fact that would do the most to clear up our ideas about heaven. I told you I would tell you the one thing that would eliminate more of our confusion about heaven than anything else. So for my first point today I just want to state that fact, and here it is:

1. There is a layover on our journey to heaven.

Just like I had a layover on my journey to America, just like I had that scheduled stop in Johannesburg, in a place that was a nice place, a place of rest but a place that was not my final destination, just like I had that layover, we have a layover on our journey to heaven. It's a layover that our believing loved ones have taken in their journey to heaven, and it's a layover

that every one of us who dies before Jesus returns is going to take. There's a layover in our journey to Heaven.

Let me give you the fancy word for it. Theologians call it "the intermediate state." It is the state between our mortal life on this broken earth and our resurrected life in eternity. Like I said, understanding that we have this layover is the single most effective thing you can do to clear up your thinking about heaven.

So let me try to explain this to you. I think the best way to explain it is simply to show you the big picture view of our journey to heaven. So we're talking about those who trust Christ, those who belong to Jesus here but in the biggest sense possible (not talking about the rapture, or millennium or anything like that) our journey to heaven has three phases.

The first phase where our journey starts is on this broken earth. We start out on this earth. We are born on the earth. We are made from the earth and, when we die, we return to the earth. God told Adam when he sinned "You came from dust and to dust you will return when you die." So we're made from the earth, and we are made for the earth. We enjoy this earth. We enjoy the food, the relationships, the way we can accomplish things. We love gardening. We love sunsets, and rugged mountains, and powerful oceans, and animals. We love this earth! If you can't find anything to love on this earth, there's something wrong with you as a human! But earth is broken. It's fallen. It's imperfect. There's sin, and pain, and disaster, and death. So we start out on this broken earth. That's phase one.

Now let's skip to phase three, the final phase, eternity, what we might call final heaven. This is the place we are going to spend eternity after Jesus comes back and we're resurrected. The place we are going to spend eternity is (are you ready to be surprised?) back on this earth. (Renewed Earth). We are going to live out eternity not up there but down here. This is where we are going to spend eternity, right here on the earth that we were made from and made for. This is where final heaven is. Some of you might be saying "Well, if this is where it's at why do you call it 'Heaven'?" Good question. We call it that because Heaven is the place where God dwells. Heaven is the center of his activity. In eternity, he will dwell on Earth. Now we're going to talk about that in a couple of weeks. But for now, let me just say "I love it! I find it extremely exciting." In fact, do you know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking "Ooh baby, do you know what that's worth? Ooh heaven is a place on earth." Allison, that's for you. It's a song from the 80's. Let me say "I've been saving that up for the whole series." It went better in my mind

OK but seriously, we start out on the broken earth in mortal bodies, and we wind up on the renewed earth in resurrection bodies after Jesus returns. But in between after we die but before we are resurrected, we have this layover, this thing that theologians call "the intermediate state." It's a lot like that layover that I had on my plane trip. It's necessary. It's got it's good points, but it is NOT our final destination. So there's these three phases to our journey to heaven: the broken earth we start on, the renewed earth we end up on, and the layover, the layover that happens between our death and the final resurrection.

Now this layover or intermediate state is mentioned in several passages, but there's really not a passage that directly speaks at length to what it's like. The passages about this intermediate state are either really brief or they are passages that use figurative language or the main point of the passage is not the intermediate state. It just mentions it in passing.

But just so that you can look it up for yourself and understand where the things I say are coming from, let me give you a thumbnail sketch of the passages that mention the intermediate state. I'm not going to take the time to read these. You might want to write them down to read them later, but let me summarize them for you:

- Philippians 1:19-26. This is the passage we'll look at today.
- 2 Corinthians 5:6-9. This is a passage some of you may know where Paul is talking and says "While we are present in the body, we are away from the Lord, but we would rather be absent from the body and at home with the Lord."
- Luke 23:43 is a passage where a thief on the cross next to Jesus believes, and Jesus says to him: "Today you will be with me in Paradise."
- Luke 16:19-31. This is the parable Jesus told of the Rich Man and Lazarus. In the parable, you may remember there's a righteous poor man named Lazarus and an unrighteous rich man. They both die, and Jesus describes the situation they immediately find themselves in. The poor man immediately goes into heaven and is with Abraham. The rich man dies, and he's immediately in hell-fire. He begs Lazarus to give him some water, but Lazarus can't help him because they're separated. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers about hell, but Abraham says they have to listen to the Scripture. So that's a parable, but Jesus does describe the intermediate state.
- Revelation 6:9-11. This is a passage in revelation where some people are killed for Jesus. John tells us that they are immediately ushered into God's presence under the altar in heaven. They are watching the injustice on the earth and asking God to make things right. God responds by handing them a robe and telling them to wait. Again that passage is in Revelation, so it's not exactly literal but it does describe the intermediate state. OK, that's most of it! There's not a lot of information about the intermediate state, just enough for us to know it exists and to know a little bit about it.

Now we're going to see in a minute what we can actually discern about the nature of the intermediate state. But for now, let me just repeat what I said earlier that understanding that we have an intermediate state or layover will do more than just about anything to clear up our thoughts about heaven. The reason it does that is because it reconciles a lot of the contradictory thoughts we may have about heaven.

If you were here for our first sermon on heaven, I said that many of us may have contradictory thoughts about heaven. For example, is heaven up in heaven in God's presence or is it down here on earth? Depends on when you're talking about. The layover is up there, but eternity is down here on earth. Is Heaven this sort of perfect throne of God situation where everyone is the same or do we have jobs and rewards and stuff to do? Depends on when. The Layover is more the throne of God, where everything is the same but eternity involves jobs and rewards.

Is heaven more ethereal or more physical? Our intermediate state is more ethereal, but our eternal state is definitely more physical.

So see, we have to understand both of these phases. There's our ultimate destination, but there's also this layover. Much of what we think of as our eternal heaven is actually not eternal heaven. It's just the layover. The layover is what our loved ones are experiencing now. The layover is probably what Paul saw when he went to the third heaven. The layover is what Stephen saw when he was about to be martyred. If these near death experiences are real, then what they are seeing should actually be the layover, not our final destination. So the most helpful thing we can understand about heaven is that there's a layover. So that's the fact of the layover. Now second, let's talk about the quality of the layover.

2. The layover is better than our point of departure.

Think with me: If we're going to have a layover, we want to know "What kind of layover is it going to be?" Is it going to be a nice layover, like my layover in South Africa? Or is it going to be a "not-nice" layover, an unpleasant layover? I hate to say this, apologies if you're Swiss but our family had a layover in Zurich one time. I have to say that was not a nice layover! The whole airport smelled like an ashtray. It was incredibly expensive. I think two pieces of pizza was \$32. Let me just say "They don't seem to like children in Zurich." They kind of treated us like we had the plague. Calvin had an orange plastic knife that didn't look like a real knife, but they took it from him like he was a terrorist. It was a not-nice layover!

So listen in all seriousness if we're going to have a layover on our journey to Heaven, we want to know what kind of layover is it going to be? Are we talking purgatory here? The Catholic church teaches that for most of us the layover is going to be a little taste of hell to cleanse us and get us ready for heaven. Is that what it's like? Or are we maybe talking about something like soul sleep? Some groups on the fringe of Christianity teach that when we die, we sort of cease to exist or become unconscious until the resurrection, then we wake up. Is it like that? What is our layover going to be like?

Paul talks about that in the passage we read at the beginning of the sermon. I think the key word in his discussion, if you had to net it out, is the word "better." It's better, better than the place we came from, better than our point of origin. That's the main thing that we need to know about the Layover. Let's take a minute to look at this passage. Let me read it again, just so we remember what Paul is saying:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 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 the 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.

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

- Philippians 1:19-26

So that's what Paul says here. Now let me just make three quick observations about this passage:

Paul is saying this situation, his imprisonment, will turn out for his deliverance. In verse 19, he says "I know that this will turn out for my deliverance." The word deliverance there is literally the word "salvation." What Paul is saying is this: Either way I win. Either way, I am delivered. If I am released, then God delivers me from prison, and I'm able to serve him more, Christ will be exalted by my ministry, and I will bear more fruit. So Paul is saying being released/exonerated is a big win for him. But then he says "If I am executed, then I will be truly saved God will deliver me from this broken world. Christ will be exalted by my martyrdom, and I'll be with God. Paul is saying that being executed is a big win for him. So what he's saying is this: Either way, whether through my martyrdom or my ministry, Christ is exalted. Either way, whether I am executed or exonerated, I win. So Paul is saying: Don't worry. It's win/win. Let me just say "Wow!" What would it be like to have that kind of confidence, to have that kind of hope? Now remember that by the time Paul writes this he had already seen heaven, so he has a leg up on us when it comes to hope. But could we ever get to the point where we believe in heaven so strongly that we hope for our loved ones' sake that they die because they're going to go to heaven? Could we get to the point where we hope that for ourselves? Is heaven that real for us?

Paul makes it sound as if the choice between execution and exonerated is his. Look at what he says in the end of verses 22-24: "Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the 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." He makes it sound like it's his decision. And then in verse 25 he seems to make the decision: "Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith."

Now that has generated a lot of discussion amongst scholars, and it used to really bug me. I was like "Wait a minute, Paul!" You are incarcerated in a Roman prison. You are going to go to trial, you are going to stand before Caesar, and you will NOT be the one they are looking to for the verdict!" I've stood before a traffic judge before, and I knew for sure that I was not the one choosing my fate! So what is Paul talking about here? Well I think what Paul is saying is not so much that the decision is totally up to him. Rather, he's trying to discern the will of God and figure out what he should pray for. You could translate it "I don't know which I prefer." He's saying "I'm not sure which end I should pray towards." Then as he thinks about it, he realizes that the Philippians really need him to minister to them, so he says "Knowing that I'm pretty sure that God is going to deliver me by exonerating me from this charge." So it's not just his choice, rather he's trying to discern God's will. BUT lastly and most importantly for what we are studying here today, notice how Paul describes what will happen if he dies. Remember, if Paul

dies, he goes not into the eternal state. He doesn't go into the final heaven on earth where everything is renewed. He goes into the intermediate state. He goes into the layover, and:

3. Paul describes the intermediate heaven as better by far than earth. Think about how he describes the layover in verse 23: "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." In verse 21 he says: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Now notice this is the guy who has been there! He's seen the intermediate heaven, so he knows what he's talking about. Notice how he describes it. There's nothing in here about purgatory. This passage and every other passage in the New Testament that describes the layover describes it as a place where God's people are better off, not worse off. There's no mention of going into a time of purging or penance. No purgatory. There's certainly nothing in here about soul sleep. Paul doesn't say "It will be lights out until Jesus resurrects me." He says if he departs he will be with Christ."

So Paul doesn't say those things. Rather, what Paul says is that to die is gain. The word he uses there means "interest" or "profit." He's saying "It's gravy. It's a Christmas bonus." If he dies, it will be to his advantage. Paul says that it is "better by far." It's better! Paul doesn't tell us much about it, because if you remember from last week, he's not allowed to, but the guy who has been there, the one who has actually seen the intermediate state, tells us that it is better. That's the most important thing we can know, for our sake and for the sake of our loved ones as we think about death.

(1) There's a layover on our journey to heaven, and (2) The layover is better than our point of origin. Now, there's one more thing we need to see about the layover:

3. The layover is better, but mysterious.

We are told that the layover is better, but we're not told many other details about it. Like I said, there really isn't a passage that explains to us in detail what the layover is going to be like. It's mysterious. However as we look at some of the passages that touch on the layover, we can piece together a few facts about it. So here are four things we know about our intermediate state, four facts about the layover:

Most importantly, we will be with Christ. That is the one fact that the Bible repeats most often about our intermediate state. Paul says in our passage that "It is better to depart and be with Christ." In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul says "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." Jesus told the thief on the cross "Today you will be with me in paradise." And the souls under the altar in Revelation are in God's presence." We will be with Christ. There will be no more need for faith no more doubt, because we will be in God's presence. He will not have made all things new on earth yet as you can see from the passage in Revelation about the souls being under the altar. There will still be injustice on earth. But in God's presence where we are, there will be justice and peace and true understanding of who we are and what we are made

for. We will bow before Christ, not just in our hearts or in faith but in reality. We're going to be with Christ.

2. We will rest. Heaven is not a place of soul sleep it's not that we will cease to exist, or be unconscious until the resurrection but it will be for us and it is for our loved ones who have died a place of true rest. Look at what John says in another passage of Revelation:

Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: 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."
- Revelation 14:13: 13

We will experience that Sabbath rest that we have all been longing for, true rest with no aches and pains, no worries that keep us up at night, no anxiety about what tomorrow will bring. True rest. Can you imagine what that will be like? Have you ever had an experience where you were just burning the candle at both ends and going, going, going and you're overwhelmed and you're so wound up that even when you have time to sleep, you can't. And then all the sudden for some reason, you get a good night's sleep. You know what that's like? I know RuthAnne Lanio does! I saw her on Wednesday before All Pro Dads, and I said how are you? She said "I'm shot. We're moving to a different house. I'm going like wild-fire and I can't sleep." She was really distraught. Then I saw her on Thursday, and she said she felt like a million bucks. What happened? She got some sleep! Well imagine what it will be like when we have true rest in every way. In the layover, we will have Christ's presence and we will have true rest.

We will have some awareness of what's happening on Earth. One of the most frequent questions I am asked by people who have loved ones that have died is: "Does my loved one know what's going on down here?" I get asked that all the time. In some sense, yes they do. Like I said, we don't have a lot of evidence to go on, but if you look at the Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus, the Rich man has great concern for what his brothers who are still on earth are experiencing. If we look at the passage about the souls under the altar in Revelation 6, they are aware of the injustice that is going on on the earth. They ask God "How long until you bring justice on the earth and avenge our blood." So they seem very aware of what's going on on earth, and they talk to God about it. Now I should point out that while they can presumably see what's going on with us, they may not care that much about the things that we care about. Remember their priorities have been re-set by the presence of God. So they probably care a lot less about your bad hair day than you do, and they probably care a lot more about your godliness than you do! But it does seem that they have the ability to know what's going on on the earth.

Let me say I also get asked all the time "Can they communicate with us? Can my loved one do things to send me messages?" Well, let me say that's a lot more doubtful. If we look at the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man (now granted, he's in hell) but he doesn't even bother asking if he can communicate with his brothers. He knows that's not going to happen. But even when he asks if they can send Lazarus, who is in heaven, back to give a message to his brothers the answer is "no." So while our loved ones do seem to have some

knowledge of what's happening on earth, they don't seem normally to be able to communicate with us. But let me say something: Even if they can't, God can. God can.

I once did a funeral for a wonderful Christian lady who died of cancer. One of the things about her was that she loved blue-birds. She had this pair of blue-birds that nested in her yard every single year, and she could even feed them by hand. Her husband was even concerned about what would happen to them after she died. A year after she passed away I met with her husband, and he told me "You know, for the first time ever the year after Sylvia died those bluebirds nested twice and had two sets of babies." He said "That really helped me in my grieving and gave me a sense of comfort. Do you think that could be Sylvia telling me everything's OK?" I said "I'm not sure it could be Sylvia, but I know it could be God." I don't think that was random. I think God did that to encourage her husband. It doesn't seem that people can normally communicate from the Layover, but God can.

So in the intermediate heaven (1) We are with God, (2) We will rest, and (3) We have some awareness of what's going on on earth. Now one last thing about intermediate heaven:

There are similarities between eternal heaven and intermediate heaven. So there are differences between our intermediate state and our eternal state. One's in heaven. The other is on earth. One is temporary. The other is permanent. One is pre-reward. The other is post-reward. There are differences, but there are also overwhelming similarities. Both are called "Heaven." Both are in God's presence. In fact, both are called Paradise, a word that we said last week relates to there being a garden. Jesus and Paul called the intermediate state paradise. John called the eternal state paradise. Because there's continuity, there is similarity. There is resemblance. There is connection between the two heavens.

In fact, there's a great deal of similarity because eternal heaven happens when intermediate heaven comes to earth. Jesus told his disciples: "In my Father's house are many rooms, I am going there to prepare a place for you." When the place he has prepared comes to earth, we'll enter our eternal state, a state that we will talk about in two weeks when we resume our study of heaven.

But in the meantime, what we need to know is that there is a layover on our journey to heaven and that the layover is better, so much better that we should long for it, so much better that we should tell others about it, so much better that we should put our hope in it.