

# Immortality: God's Gift To The Saints

No question about it, the Bible clearly reveals that immortality is God's gracious gift to His saints. But if immortality is a gift that is given only to the saints, why do millions believe that it is an inherent quality of the human soul? What does the Bible say about this subject?

There is no single doctrine which commands such universal acceptance among religious adherents over so vast a span of time. Indeed, this doctrine has been almost synonymous with religion itself. Not one major religion disputes it and every religious tradition affirms it in one form or another.

In the ancient Near East, it dominated religious thought. In African and Asian tribal religions it is prominent and religions of all civilizations have endorsed it. It is an important relic of Platonic thought. In the world of professing Christianity, only a few sects question it. Seventy-one percent of Americans believe it.

It is the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the view that the human soul has a conscious existence immediately after death.

Yet the Bible, reputedly the authoritative document of the Christian faith, nowhere teaches this doctrine. It is nothing less than astounding that the Old Testament, a document of the ancient Near East, roundly rejects the teaching that the soul consciously survives death when that teaching was commonplace then, and that the New Testament equally rejects this doctrine, believed by the vast majority in the first century.

Amazingly, the Bible as a religious document is almost unique in its utter refutation of the view that the real person is the soul inside, which goes into another world upon the death of the body. This is no minor issue to be mistaken about. Granted there are some doctrines which are inconsequential, and no church has all truth and no error. We all know in part and prophecy (preach) in part. But the true church, the church divinely commissioned to take the gospel to the world, must know the fundamental doctrine of what man really is.

Could God have started a church and continue to actively lead that church when it does not even know what man is and what happens to him after death? Is this a minor doctrine?

The implications for any church which is wrong on this issue are profound. Immortality of the soul defender John W. Cooper, in his book *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting*, says that if the doctrine is not true then "a doctrine affirmed by most of the church since its beginning is false. A second consequence is more personal and existential—what millions of Christians believe will happen when they die is an illusion." Would God have led so many believers into error, or would He not rescue them from that error, if He were, in fact, the Founder of those churches which believe in the immortality of the soul?

We need to dispassionately and without bias examine this critical subject.

One respected theologian came to what was a startling conclusion for him: that his church had misled him on this critical issue. Church of Christ elder Edward Fudge explains in the book which he finally wrote to show the results of his study, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*: "I was reared on traditionalist teaching. I accepted it because it was said to rest on Scripture. Closer investigation has shown this claim to be mistaken. Careful study has shown that both Old and New Testaments teach instead a resurrection of the wicked for the purpose of divine judgment....so my beliefs have changed-as a result of careful study."

So have the views of an even more well-known and renowned theologian and evangelical apologist, Clark Pinnock. In his chapter on "The Conditional View" in the well-researched book, *Four Views on Hell*, Pinnock, after showing a number of scriptures disproving the immortality of the soul, wonders aloud why so many churches should have adopted what would appear an obviously unbiblical view. An explanation for this, he offers, "exists in a Hellenistic belief about human nature that has dominated Christian thinking about eschatology from the beginning. There has been a virtual consensus that the soul survives death because it is by nature an incorporeal substance. This assumption goes back to Plato's view of the soul as metaphysically indestructible, a view shared by Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. The Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul has affected theology unduly on this point—a good example of the occasional Hellenization of Christian doctrine."

### **It is time we recapture and rescue Christianity from Hellenism!**

It is time we get back to the Bible, especially in light of the fact that the Protestant Reformation was ostensibly based on *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone! If this claim is true, then why should nonbiblical sources be more influential than Scripture in the formation of Christian doctrine? Yet defenders of the immortal soul doctrine will protest that Scripture itself is clear that the soul is immortal. There are some scriptures which do, indeed, seem to clearly teach an eternal conscious existence in hell. We can't ignore these scriptures, if we accept all biblical texts as the Word of God—but we must seek to understand them without reading foreign ideas into them.

Revelation 14:10 refers to people who "will be tormented with fire and brimstone." Verse 11 says that the "smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image." Now if they don't have immortal souls, how will that be possible? Will God give them immortal souls to facilitate their everlasting punishment? In any event, those who believe in conditional immortality, like the Church of God International, reject the notion of everlasting conscious punishment. So what do we do with a text like Revelation 14:10,11, which was not smuggled into the Scriptures by Plato? These verses seem devastating to our view.

In Matthew 25:41, Jesus refers to those who will depart into "eternal fire." Verse 46 has been especially appealed to by defenders of the immortal soul view. It says the wicked

will go away into "eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." If "eternal life" means unending life and conscious existence, then why in the same passage doesn't "eternal punishment" mean unending conscious existence as well?

Matthew 18:8 says that "it is better for you to enter eternal life maimed or lame than...to be thrown into the eternal fire." Why would the fire be eternal if it has nothing to burn and if the wicked are annihilated, as we teach?

We need to answer all these texts.

## **Understanding *Aionios*, or How Long Is 'Everlasting'?**

Surprising as it might seem, "eternal" and "everlasting" do not always mean never-ending, but can actually mean "age-lasting," that is, lasting for a limited period. It is important to bear in mind that what we have are English translations of the Bible and that the Scriptures were originally inspired in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. To study to show ourselves approved, we have to acquire some rudimentary understanding of the biblical languages. If we are going to pronounce authoritatively on certain complex doctrinal matters, we must be equipped.

There is an easy way to prove that *aionios* does not always mean never-ending and that it can mean eternal in its results and consequences.

In Jude 1:7 we read that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the "punishment of eternal fire." Yet no one believes that Sodom and Gomorrah are burning now. The inhabitants suffered the punishment of eternal fire in the sense that they were completely destroyed; the fire was eternal in its results and effects; it left nothing to be consumed.

There can be no dispute about this for there are no cities named Sodom and Gomorrah burning today! Scripture does not say they suffered the punishment of Gehenna (hell) fire, so one cannot reason that perhaps they are suffering (unknown to us) in hell. They suffered the punishment of a literal fire which swept through the area. (One scholar points out that at least seventy times in the Bible the Greek word *aionios* qualifies objects of a temporary and limited nature.)

The Hebrew equivalent of *aionios* in the Old Testament is *olam*, which can also mean eternal or everlasting, but is also used in reference to a limited span of time. To prove decisively that "forever" or "eternal" do not always mean never-ending, notice the following passages in which *olam* obviously means age-lasting or a limited time.

In Exodus 12:24 we read that the sprinkling of the blood at the Passover was to be "an ordinance for ever." The Aaronic priesthood was also said to have been a "perpetual statute" (Exodus 29:9; 40:15; Leviticus 3:17). Solomon's temple was supposed to have been everlasting (1 Kings 8:13). The ritual of tending to the light in the tabernacle was to be "a statute for ever" (Exodus 27:21). All the sacrifices and circumcision were said to last "forever." Now how many Christians, even among law-keepers, are still practicing

these rituals which the Bible clearly says should be observed forever, as part of an "everlasting covenant"? Clearly, the Hebrew word *olam*, the equivalent of *aionios* in the passages quoted, means age-lasting, to be in force for the life of the Old Covenant.

Romans 16:25 talks about the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret "for long ages." What the reader of the English translations of the Bible would not know immediately is that the word translated "long ages" is *aionios*—the same word translated "forever" in the passages quoted about eternal fire and everlasting punishment. It is indisputable, therefore, that the word carries more than one meaning and cannot, under all circumstances, be interpreted as eternal in the sense of never-ending.

But then there is Matthew 3:12, pulled out by immortal soul advocates to prove their point. It refers to the "unquenchable fire" which will be unleashed on the lost.

Again, just as in the case of the "eternal" fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the fire threatened by Jesus here is one which will accomplish its purpose of utter destruction, one whose purpose and mission cannot be thwarted by anyone or anything. This is the sense of the phrase.

To prove that this is not speculation, turn to Jeremiah 17:27 where a similar threat was made to a rebellious Israel. Hear the words of Yahweh: "But if you do not listen to me, to keep the sabbath day holy...then I will kindle a fire in its [Jerusalem's] gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched."

Yahweh threatened an unquenchable fire that could not be put out by all the firemen in the world. It would achieve its purpose: the utter destruction of Jerusalem and its sinning inhabitants. The unquenchable fire, like the eternal fire, refers to the results and consequences of its action, not the duration of its time.

Isaiah 34:9,10 is a clincher. Notice the imagery of the punishment proposed for Edom: "And the streams of Edom shall be turned into a pitch, and her soil into brimstone; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up for ever [notice this similarity with the Revelation texts quoted earlier], from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever."

Yes, there it is! The fire would completely destroy Edom; its smoke would proverbially go up forever, "from generation to generation." The land would be desolate—no more; it would be completely destroyed. That the fire would be "eternal" and "unquenchable" means a fire which no one would be able to quench until it achieved its purpose. See also Isaiah 1:30,31: "For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. And the strong shall become tow, and his work a spark, and both of them shall burn together, with none to quench them."

There it is—"none to quench them"—clearly meaning both will burn until they become extinct, annihilated!

As Clark Pinnock has suggested in his essay in the book *Four Views on Hell*, "I believe that the real basis of the traditional view of the nature of hell is not in the Bible's talk of the wicked perishing, but an unbiblical anthropology that is read into the text. If a biblical reader approached the text with the assumption that souls are immortal, would they not be compelled to interpret texts that speak of the wicked being destroyed to mean that they are tortured forever since according to that supposition they cannot go out of existence?....[T]he belief in the immortality of the soul will necessarily skew the exegesis."

This is why we have dealt extensively in this booklet with the discussion of hell, for at the root of the traditional view of an ever-burning hell is the false doctrine of the immortality of the human soul.

The attempt to use Matthew 25:41,46 to prove this false doctrine fails miserably. The fact is, both the righteous and the damned will have their fates sealed eternally. The righteous will enjoy unending life as a reward and the unrighteous will suffer everlasting punishment-their punishment will be final, inexorable, irredeemable. The unrighteous will suffer everlasting punishment, not everlasting punishing!

In his book, *Life and Immortality*, Basil Atkinson notes that "when the adjective *aionios* meaning 'everlasting' is used in Greek with nouns of action it has reference to the result of the action, not the process.

"Thus, the phrase 'everlasting punishment' is comparable to 'everlasting redemption' and 'everlasting salvation,' both scriptural phrases. No one supposes that we are being redeemed or being saved forever.

"In the same way the lost will not be passing through a process of punishment for ever but will be punished once and for all, with eternal results. On the other hand, the noun 'life' is not a noun of action, but a noun expressing a state; that is, the life itself is eternal."

Finally, Samuele Bacchiocchi in his insightful book *Immortality or Resurrection?* says of *aionios*, translated "everlasting" or "forever": "Ancient Greek papyri contain numerous examples of Roman emperors being described as *aionios*. What is meant is that they held their office for life. Unfortunately, the English words 'eternal' or 'everlasting' do not accurately render the meaning of *aionios* which literally means 'age-lasting.'"

## **Explicit Texts on Destruction**

While some have tried to impose their own preconceived ideas on the biblical texts, a clear reading of the texts which refer to the fate of the wicked and the lost indicates that their end is destruction. Let's look at some plain texts.

Malachi 4:1 says that on the Day of the Lord "all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch." That text speaks most forcefully of destruction, and utter annihilation. How

could we get any other concept from that text? When we are not imposing preconceived ideas on the biblical text, it is obvious that the fate of the unsaved is destruction.

Psalm 37:38 says that "transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off."

In Matthew 13:30, Jesus also uses the imagery of total destruction to describe the fate of the wicked. The proverbial weeds are gathered to be burned. The metaphor is of total destruction. In Psalm 37:2, we read that the wicked will "fade like the grass"; they "shall be cut off" and "will be no more" (verses 9,10).

Hebrews 10:27 refers the "fury of fire which will consume the adversaries." Defenders of the immortal soul doctrine have often replied to the avalanche of texts showing that the wicked will be destroyed by saying that the word destruction is sometimes used to mean "put out of action." The example is used of Christ who, as it were, destroyed Satan the devil through His action on the stake, yet the devil continues to exist.

It is amazing the ingenious attempts which are made to preserve a cherished, inherited belief. While it is true that words do have several meanings, it takes no linguist with a doctorate to see that the contexts of words determine meaning. That destruction could possibly mean to put out of action and that it does take that meaning in one or a few texts does not mean that we should ignore the clear, ordinary meaning of the word as it is used in the many other texts of Scripture.

It is hard to ignore texts like Isaiah 1:28, which says that "rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed."

There is one text that cannot rationally or exegetically be open to any other meaning than the one favored by those who deny ever-burning hell and the immortality of the soul. This text is crystal clear once one really focuses on it.

We return to the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were destroyed by eternal fire and are clearly not burning today. This fire was complete in its work of utter destruction. Peter says that God turned "the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes" (2 Peter 2:6). We don't have to wonder whether Sodom and Gomorrah are burning today. Those cities have been already turned to ashes as a result of the eternal fire.

So, clearly, their fire resulted in complete destruction in the ordinary sense of the word. Let's go on, for it gets more interesting. What God did was condemn them to extinction—to annihilation!—not an unending burning. But it gets even more interesting, and now we'll see why there can be no other explanation of this bombshell of a text against the ever-burning hell and immortal soul concepts. In the latter part of verse 6, we are told that God "condemned them [Sodom and Gomorrah] to extinction and made them an example of those who were to be ungodly," meaning that the ungodly will suffer the same fate. What fate? Utter extinction! They will be turned to ashes (which is exactly what Malachi 4:1 says).

It could not be clearer! What Sodom and Gomorrah suffered served as an example of the kind of destruction that awaits the wicked at the end.

(Other important texts applying the word destruction to the fate of the wicked are Philippians 3:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:2,3; and 2 Thessalonians 1:9.)

### **Only the Body Dies?**

An argument often used to distort the biblical truth about man is the view that only the body dies at the withdrawal of man's breath; the soul cannot. Yet Ezekiel 18:4 explicitly states that "the soul that sins shall die." Those same words are repeated in verse 20.

The Messianic text in Isaiah 53 shows that Jesus as a human being went the way of all flesh—He died. And when He died it was not just the body which died but His soul. Notice Isaiah 53:12, which predicted that the Messiah would pour out "his soul to death."

See also Psalm 89:48: "What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol [the grave—NKJV] ?"

Matthew 10:28 is abundantly clear: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body...." The soul can be destroyed! Why do we refuse to believe the plain statements of Scripture?

### **Resurrection or Immortal Soul?**

The title of the book of one noted theologian, Oscar Cullman, says it all: *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* It is an either-or issue. You cannot have both.

What is the purpose of the resurrection if the saints are already in heaven with Christ and the wicked in hell?

Nor is there any evidence that there is some special place called "paradise" where Christians stay in transit until the resurrection when they join Christ in heaven.

The uniform testimony of Scripture is that the dead remain in their graves until the time of the resurrection.

John 5:28,29 says, "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."

Daniel 12:2 says, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." First Corinthians 15:52 shows that it is at the resurrection that the saved will gain immortality, and before then the dead are asleep in their graves. "For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable....For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable and this

mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

First Thessalonians 4:15 refers to the dead as being "asleep." The text goes on to say that when the Lord returns "the dead in Christ will rise first" (verse 16). Now if the dead go immediately to be with the Lord at death, how can they only rise at the last trump?

The Scriptures show that at the resurrection it is the entire person who is raised, not merely his body. "The dead in Christ" are the persons who die in Christ, not just their bodies.

Look at Job 14:12 to see unequivocally that it is the person himself, not just a part of him, who rises when Christ returns: "So man [his entire being] lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake; or be roused out of his sleep."

This takes us to the next point: that the Bible consistently refers to death as a sleep.

## **The Sleep of the Dead**

If death does not indicate unconsciousness why would the analogy of sleep be meaningful? The Psalmist refers to the "sleep of death" (Psalm 13:3). Psalm 115:17 says, "The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence." Matthew 27:52 states that "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised." In Acts 7:60 we read of Stephen who "fell asleep." Second Peter 3:4 speaks of those who ask, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued...."

Other equally clear texts show unmistakably that the dead are unconscious. Psalm 146:4 says, "When his [man's] breath departs he returns to his earth; on that very day his plans ["thoughts"—KJV] perish." The Psalmist asks, "Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise thee? ...Are thy wonders known in the darkness, or thy saving help in the land of forgetfulness?" (Psalm 88:10,12).

The idea that the saints are having a great time praising the Lord and playing on harps finds no support in the Sacred

Scriptures! The dead are asleep; they are in silence, in the land of forgetfulness! Psalm 6:5 says pointedly, "For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol [the grave] who can give thee praise?"

## **Immortality to Be Sought**

Immortality is set forth in Scripture as something to be sought and attained in the future. Romans 2:6,7 says that God "will render to every man according to his works; to those

who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, He will give eternal life."

Immortality is a gift of God through Christ. It is not possessed inherently by humans. Only the saved will be granted immortality. For proof see 2 Timothy 1:10, which states that Jesus Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

## What Is a Soul?

Let's go to the very first book of the Bible to see God's revelation of what man really is and what constitutes the soul. In Genesis 2:7 we read, significantly, that "God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [or soul—KJV]." Notice that man was not given a soul; God did not breathe a soul within man. Man became a living soul, a living being.

The Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*, which is often translated "person," meaning one's entire being, not some immaterial part of him. The Hebrews had a holistic conception of human beings.

In Genesis 12:5 we read of Abraham's gathering all the "persons" (*nephesh*, rendered "souls" in the KJV) they had gotten in Haran. Genesis 46:27 says that seventy "persons" (*nephesh*) went into Egypt.

Leviticus 7:20 says that the "person" (*nephesh*) who touches any unclean thing shall be cut off. The English translations use "soul" and "person" interchangeably in a number of texts. (The King James Version regularly uses "soul" while the Revised Standard Version uses "person"—it has the same meaning and comes from the same Hebrew, *nephesh*.) Leviticus 23:30 says, "And whoever does any work on this same day, that person [soul] I will destroy from among his people."

The problem is that many persons reading English translations might not realize that a number of references to a "person" (or "persons") dying are translated from the Hebrew *nephesh*, which means soul. If they did, it would be patently clear that the notion that the soul cannot die is a flagrant error.

Numbers 31:19, for example, says, "Encamp outside the camp seven days; whoever of you has killed any person [*nephesh*]...." See also Numbers 35:15,30; Joshua 20:3,9; Genesis 37:21; Deuteronomy 19:6,11; and Jeremiah 40:14,15 to see that souls (persons) die.

We find in the very first revelation about man's creation that man did not possess a soul but rather was a soul. So where did we get the concept of an immaterial soul that constitutes the real person and that could have an independent existence from the body? As Clark Pinnock and other scholars have pointed out, this view in Christian theology has come from Platonic thought.

## What Is the Spirit in Man?

Saying that man has no immaterial soul within is not to say that man is not distinguished from the animal kingdom. Man is made in the image of God; the animals and plants are not. Man has intelligence and reasoning ability and shares a number of characteristics with his Maker. Nothing must be done to take away from man's uniqueness in the created order. However, we need not build myths to sustain our uniqueness and supremacy in the earthly created order.

Some believe that the spirit in man, which goes back to God upon death of the body, can enable man to have conscious existence at that time.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 says that "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit [*ruach*] returns to God who gave it."

The spirit is the life force which God breathed into man which made him a living soul. It is the life principle, the life energy, without which human life is not possible. As Job says, "If he [God] should take back his spirit [*ruach*] to himself, and gather to himself his breath [*neshamah*], all flesh would perish together, and man would return to the dust" (Job 34:14,15). The spirit animates human life. It has no separate existence apart from the body.

The breath of life which God breathed into man is equated with the spirit in man. Notice the Hebrew parallelism in Job

27:3: "[A]s long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God in my nostrils; my lips will not speak falsehood." Notice this other parallelism (where the same thought is expressed in two ways for emphasis) in Job 33:4: "The spirit [*ruach*] of God has made me, and the breath [*neshamah*] of the Almighty gives me life."

Yet another example of this parallelism is found in Isaiah 42:5: "Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out...who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it." The Scriptures are, indeed, abundantly clear that the breath of life is equated with the spirit in man.

Those who use Ecclesiastes 12:7, which says that "the spirit returns to God who gave it," to prove that the spirit is equated with the immortal soul have a very uncomfortable dilemma: They are forced to teach that everyone who dies, not just the saved, goes to heaven irrespective of whether he had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ!

No, the spirit in man is the breath of life which was given to man. As Job 34:14,15 says, "If [God] should back his spirit to himself...all flesh would perish"—cease from existence.

Objection after objection crumbles as we look at the scriptural teaching on what man really is. Yet all the world's religions, all New Age philosophies, all of Eastern

mysticism, and almost all of the Christian-professing world have accepted the very opposite of what the Bible teaches.

## **Some Major Objections Considered**

We now turn to some of the major objections raised against the view that the soul is mortal. We will see in each instance that the objection is not sustained.

### **Rachel's Departing Soul**

Let's begin with Genesis 35:18, which says of Rachel, "And as her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name Benno'ni...." Now does her soul's departing mean that it had a separate, conscious existence?

Samuele Bacchiocchi puts it well in his book *Immortality or Resurrection?*: "The phrase 'her soul was departing' most likely means that 'her breath was stopping' or, as we might say, she was taking her last sigh. It is important to note that the noun soul-*nephesh* derives from the verb by the same root which means 'to breathe,' 'to respire,' 'to draw breath.' The inbreathing of the breath of life resulted in man becoming a living soul, a breathing organism.

"The departing of the breath of life results in a person becoming a dead soul. Thus as Edmund Jacob explains, 'The departure of *nephesh* is a metaphor for death; a dead man is one who has ceased to breathe.'"

Another text commonly misunderstood is 1 Kings 17:21,22, which says of Elijah: "Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the Lord, 'O Lord, my God, let this child's soul come into him again.'"

If the soul is not a separate part of the person, how could Elijah make this prayer? The Lord heard Elijah's prayer, "and the soul of the child came into him again and he revived."

Notice first that in verse 17 it is said that "there was no breath left in him," which harmonizes well with what we have covered, showing that the departure of the breath of life results in death. It was when God breathed into man's nostrils the breath of life that man became a living soul. When the breath of life came back into the widow's son mentioned here, his *nephesh* (or life-force) came back and he became conscious again.

The soul of the child coming back into him simply means that his life returned! Nothing more, nothing less.

### **Lazarus and the Rich Man**

But the most popular of all the misunderstood texts is found in Luke 16, which records the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. For many Christians, this is the single text which seals the issue.

First, note that this was a parable. It was not a real historical event or the reporting or recounting of an actual event. It was a parable, a teaching, a pedagogical device designed to express truths in symbolic or metaphorical terms.

It is important, in looking at parables, to notice the contexts carefully, to see what were the lessons which the storyteller wanted to convey.

Jesus had been teaching on covetousness and stewardship (Luke 16:1-13). Jesus usually selects an appropriate parable to illustrate his ethical teachings. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus was a classic one showing the rich's insensitivity to and exploitation of the poor.

Many theologians realize that Luke was the Gospel writer most concerned about social and political issues and that his gospel focuses more on the justice and equity issues. (Advocates of "Liberation Theology" are particularly fond of Luke.)

This parable highlights Luke's emphasis on concern for the poor and downtrodden and God's judgment of the selfish and sinful rich. Even the distinguished evangelical theologian Murray Harris, author of the book *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament*, admits that "the parable of the rich man and Lazarus was told to illustrate the danger of wealth (Luke 6:24) and the necessity of repentance (Luke 16:28-30), not to satisfy our natural curiosity about man's anthropological condition after death." (See his article, "The New Testament View of Life after Death" in the January, 1986, issue of the scholarly journal, *Themelios*.)

Read the entire parable again.

Jesus is emphasizing the importance of the Pharisees and His hearers accepting His message then while He walked among them, for He was the ultimate revelation. For those hearers, that was their window of opportunity. The punch line is in Luke 16:31: "He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead.'"

Persons who knowingly and deliberately reject the truth of the gospel now would not accept it even if they were given another chance after the resurrection. (Of course, every human being will be given one chance and those who reject that one chance will forfeit salvation. Millions of ignorant sinners, however, will get their first chance for salvation after their resurrection. Write for our free brochure entitled *Does God Love the World Enough to Save It?* for a full discussion on this controversial topic.)

If this parable were teaching us about the intermediate state, it would be absolutely irrelevant to the context, as Murray Harris implies. How one can construct a theology of the afterlife based on a parable is beyond exegetical warrant.

An interesting point to show that the rich man in the parable is not suffering the pangs of hell, as described by the preachers, is that the word translated "hell" in the passage is *hades*, the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol* which means simply the grave—where everyone, including the righteous, go. Only in this parable do we see *hades* used in any way to describe any kind of activity other than dead silence!

Jesus used literary license in this case, which was consistent with the allegorical method He often used.

## **The Witch of Endor**

Perhaps the most challenging passage in the Old Testament for a group like the Church of God International is found in 1 Samuel 28, concerning the witch of Endor and her supposed bringing forth of the prophet Samuel.

Saul had been seeking a word from the Lord as to his encounter with the Philistines, but the Lord had spoken not a word to him, either by dream or through the prophets. In desperation he turned to a medium and asked for Samuel to be brought up. Saul had to disguise himself and go to the witch, for it was he who had abolished witchcraft in Israel and punished the sorcerers.

But let's read the troubling passages in 1 Samuel 28:11: "Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' He said, 'Bring up Samuel for me.' When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul....' [T]he woman said to Saul, 'I see a god coming up out of the earth.' He said to her, 'What is his appearance?' And she said, 'An old man is coming up; and he is wrapped in a robe.' And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance" (verses 11-14). On the surface, this appears to be a pretty devastating passage to our view. But let's examine it more closely.

First, look at the implications from within the doctrinal perspective of the immortal soul defenders themselves. God, on a number of occasions in the Old Testament, speaks against wizards, mediums, and the like, and in the law pronounces the death penalty for witchcraft. It was that serious (see Leviticus 19:31 and Isaiah 8:19,20).

Notice, too, that 1 Chronicles 10:13,14, in reporting on Saul's death, makes the rather striking commentary: "So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord slew him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse."

That one act was sufficient to cause Saul to lose his kingdom. But notice what the immortal soul defenders would be saying. They would be asserting, in effect, that Yahweh, who outlawed witches and seers, actually caused one of them to bring up one of His faithful servants, Samuel!

Incidentally, if Samuel was already in Abraham's bosom as a righteous man in heaven, then how was he seen coming up out of the earth? Is that the abode of the righteous? Some believe this, but the evidence against the view that *sheol* had different compartments and was not the common abode of the dead is so overwhelming that even some immortal soul advocates reject that view. Bacchiocchi documents the case against that view in his book, *Immortality or Resurrection?*, quoting one theologian who defends the immortal soul as saying, "Perhaps most interesting for traditional Christians to note is the fact that it [*sheol*] is the resting place of the dead, irrespective of their religion during life....There is no doubt that believers and unbelievers all were thought to go to Sheol when they die."

Desmond Alexander, professor of Semitic studies, says in his article on "The Old Testament View of Life after Death" in the January 1986 issue of *Themelios* that "while it is tempting to suggest, especially in light of later Jewish thinking, that in Old Testament times Sheol was perceived as consisting of different regions, the biblical texts themselves do not support such a possibility."

But let's get back to the Saul-Samuel story. Apart from the gross anomaly of Samuel's coming up from the earth when he was supposed to be in heaven, how do we explain the fact that the righteous man Samuel, apparently by the power of the witch of Endor, cooperates with her in her ungodly craft by actually coming up to see Saul?

Do witches and mediums have the power to rouse the righteous from their heavenly bliss, or from "paradise"? Obviously, this was a satanic impersonation. The fact that the Bible writer says it was Samuel is not meant to be taken on the surface. We have already seen the inexplicable problems with accepting that it was really Samuel. The writer obviously means to convey the point that a person looking exactly like Samuel and representing himself like Samuel was seen. As far as Saul was concerned, it was Samuel who was seen. The narrator mentions a dialogue between Saul and Samuel to advance his point of how Saul reacted to the person he thought was Samuel. We can't impose our modern, precise standards of journalism and reporting on the biblical text. The Holy Spirit inspired enough passages to show where the dead really are—unless we are stating flatly that the Bible contradicts itself. That is the only alternative to the view that it was not actually Samuel.

## **To Die Is Gain**

Philippians 1:21 is another misunderstood text: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (verses 21, 23).

So did Paul really believe that he would be with Christ immediately upon death? If that is so, then he would flatly contradict himself.

In 1 Timothy 4:7,8 Paul says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me [kept] the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to those who have loved his appearing."

It was the same Paul who wrote in 1 Corinthians 15 that the dead in Christ would rise "at the last trumpet" (verse 52). He knew when the dead would get their opportunity with the Lord. Was he telling the Philippians one thing and the Corinthians another?

No, Paul was simply telling the Philippians from this prison epistle that with all the pressures and frustrations of his life, with all his suffering, death would be gain to him, for he had the assurance of salvation. He knew that at the next moment of consciousness, he would be with his Lord. For him death would be gain—"But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (verse 24), for there was much more work to be done. As for him, he could well die and take his rest. We must not read our biases into Scripture, but must let the texts speak for themselves.

### **Away From the Body**

Yet another puzzling text to some is found in 2 Corinthians 5:8, which says, "We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

Here again Paul writes painfully about his struggles and anguish. "Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling....For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety."

Paul was longing to reach that stage where death would be swallowed up into victory, when sorrow and pain would be no more; where our very mortal, sin-wracked bodies would be changed into Christ's glorious body (Philippians 3:21). He was looking forward to the time when "this perishable [body] would put on the imperishable and this mortal nature must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:53).

At the resurrection-not at death-what is now a "physical body" will be raised as a "spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). We are only absent from this body at the resurrection! If we read into the biblical texts our Platonic, dualistic notions, then we will come to the wrong conclusions. If we let Scripture interpret itself, we will see that this meaning harmonizes with the rest of the biblical revelation. Notice how Paul juxtaposes his statement about being absent from the body with the resurrection: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive good or evil..." (2 Corinthians 5:10).

### **Thief on the Cross**

Certainly one of the most famous stories in all of the Bible is the story of the "thief on the cross." Jesus promised that repentant sinner, "Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). If the thief went with Jesus to paradise upon death, then certainly this might prove the immortality of the soul.

But where did Jesus Himself go that day? He went to *sheol* (Hebrew) or *hades* (Greek)—the grave! Jesus was dead for three days and three nights and there is nothing to suggest that His death was different from other humans, with whom he shared a common nature, as Hebrews tells us.

With a simple punctuation mark the problem is solved. What Jesus actually said, was "Truly, I say to you today, you shall [in the future, when the Kingdom of God comes (see verse 42)] be with me in Paradise."

The original Greek has no punctuation so it is left up to the translators, who naturally have their bias, to supply the punctuation marks. We choose to punctuate it differently, for that is allowable in the Greek and harmonizes with everything we have read so far.

Paradise is not some place that Jesus went the day He died. Paradise is equated in Scripture with the very presence of God (see 2 Corinthians 12:2,3 and Revelation 2:7).

After Jesus's resurrection on the third day, He told Mary, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). Jesus was in the grave for three days before His resurrection, so He could not have meant (when He spoke to the thief) that on the day of His death the thief would join Him in a place where He Himself would not be—heaven.

Clearly, the translators have combined the punctuation with their prejudice!

## **The Worm That Won't Die**

Samuele Bacchiocchi says Isaiah 66:24 is regarded by traditionalists as the "clearest witness to eternal punishment in the Old Testament" (*Immortality of Resurrection?*). The text says, "And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched..."

We have already dealt with the concept of the unquenchable fire. But what does it mean, "their worm will not die"? Is this contradicting the overwhelming evidence we have seen that man's soul is mortal? Edward Fudge, who, before deeper study, believed man had an immortal soul, comments on this passage in his book, *The Fire That Consumes*:

"Several kinds of flies lay eggs in the flesh of carcasses. The maggots hatched from them serve a beneficial purpose in hastening decomposition. But they also are a symbol of ignominy precisely because they attack only bodies deprived of burial."

Note that point. It is particularly loathsome and contemptible that one's body would be in the open without a proper burial. What better way to portray the ignominy and disgrace of the eternal fate of the wicked?

Keep in mind also Daniel 12:2, which talks about some awakening (in the resurrection) to "everlasting contempt." The same Hebrew word translated "contempt" in Daniel 12:2 (*deraon*) is translated "loathsome" in Isaiah 66:24.

As Bacchiocchi says, "This means that the contempt is caused by the decomposition of their bodies, and not by the never-ending suffering of the wicked."

Notice Jeremiah 25:33, which graphically portrays the disgrace of the fate of the wicked: "And those slain by the Lord on that day shall extend from one end of the earth to the other. They shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried; they shall be dung on the surface of the ground." This is precisely the image of disgrace that fellow-prophet Isaiah wanted to convey in Isaiah 66:24. Their bodies will be left for the worms. "Such discarded corpses are fit only for worms and fire," says Fudge in his book.

## **Souls Under the Altar**

Revelation 6:9-11 is another text used to defend the immortal soul. It speaks about the souls under the altar asking, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Now anyone with the slightest training in theology should realize the danger of using an apocalyptic book, largely employing allegory and symbols, to establish doctrine. If the blood of Abel could cry out from the ground against the injustice of that righteous man's murder (Genesis 4:10), why can't the souls of the saints, as it were, cry out against their martyrdom?

Besides, does anyone really believe that all the saints of the Lord are literally located under the altar? The altar in the Old Testament was where sacrifices took place. The martyrs had sacrificed not the blood of bulls and goats but their own on God's altar, symbolically. Let's not stretch the Scripture to fit preconceived ideas.

## **Spirit, Soul, and Body**

First Thessalonians 5:23 states, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless...." This text, which seems to teach a tripartite view of man-spirit, soul, and body-simply means that Paul hoped the Thessalonians would be wholly, thoroughly prepared for the coming of the Lord.

It is similar to Jesus's saying for emphasis in Mark 12:30: "[Y]ou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This does not mean Jesus felt there were four distinct parts to human nature.

Soul is used in a variety of ways in Scripture. Paul hoped that they would sanctify their bodies from the works of the flesh, such as fornication; that they would keep their spirit in tune with God's and purify their soul in terms of their consciousness.

### **Does It Make a Difference?**

Winston Churchill once said that some men occasionally stumble upon the truth, but get up, brush themselves off, and go right on as though nothing had happened. Could this describe you? How passionate are you for the pursuit of the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Are you like the Bereans who "received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11)? Are you doing your best to "present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling [or dissecting] the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15)? Go over this booklet, look over all the scriptures, and reason through them (see Acts 17:2).

What are the mathematical odds of your being in touch with a group of people—out of the six billion in the world today—who reject the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, a doctrine accepted by every one of the major world religions and almost every one of the over 26,000 Christian churches (yes, it's that many!)?

What are the odds of your finding a group which can put together the scriptures we have, showing the truth about what man is?

Well, you have beaten the odds and here you are with the truth in your hands. God has so designed it that you would get this truth. How will you show your appreciation?

We suggest that you write for other literature from us to see what other surprises might be in store.

In the meantime, remember the words quoted earlier in this booklet from immortal-soul defender John Cooper in his book *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*: "If what they [his opponents] are saying is true, then two disturbing conclusions immediately follow.

"First, a doctrine affirmed by most of the Christian church since its beginning is false. A second consequence is personal and existential—what millions of Christians believe will happen when they die is also a delusion."

Is God the author of confusion and delusion?

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