

Heaven and Hell – Part 2

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August 22, 2009

No conscious afterlife without a resurrection

So is man an immortal soul? No. Does he have an immortal soul? No. The Bible declares plainly that man is temporary, of the dust of the earth. There is no immortal quality about man at all—unless and until he receives it from God through a resurrection, which means being brought back to life in a body, raised from the dead as Jesus was.

The Bible clearly states that man puts on immortality at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), not at the end of his physical life. Until that time man has no more permanence than animals.

Nor does man have some spiritual soul with conscious awareness independent of the physical body. This has been proven time and time again when individuals have gone into comas for weeks, months and sometimes years at a time, only to emerge from that comatose state with no memory or recollection of the passage of time.

If one had a soul that existed independently of the human body, wouldn't that soul have some memory of remaining aware during the months or years the body was unconscious? That would be powerful and logical proof of the existence of an independent soul within the human body—yet no one has ever reported any such thing, in spite of thousands of such occurrences. This fact likewise supports what the Bible teaches—that consciousness ceases at death. Only through a resurrection to life will consciousness return.

Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?

Some believe that various scriptures support belief in an immortal soul. Let's consider some of these passages and understand what they really say.

Matthew 10:28 Destroying soul and body in hell? "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell".

(Matthew 10:28)

Is Jesus teaching in this verse that the soul lives on after death and is immortal? Not at all. If you look at this scripture closely, you see that Jesus is actually saying that the soul can be destroyed. Jesus is here warning about the judgment of God. He says not to fear those who can destroy only the physical human body (soma in the Greek), but fear Him (God) who is also able to destroy the soul (psuche)—here denoting the person's physical being with its consciousness.

Simply stated, Christ was showing that when one man kills another the resulting death is only temporary; God can raise anyone to conscious life again either soon after death (see Matthew

9:23-25; 27:52; John 11:43-44; Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-11) or in the age to come after Christ returns to the earth. The person who has died is not ultimately gone forever. We must have a proper fear of God, who alone can remove one's physical life and all possibility of any later resurrection to life. When God destroys one in "hell," that person's destruction is permanent. What is the "hell" spoken of in this verse? The Greek word used here is Gehenna, which comes from the combination of two Hebrew words, gai and hinnom, meaning "Valley of Hinnom." The term originally referred to a valley on the south side of Jerusalem in which pagan deities were worshipped.

Because of its reputation as an abominable place, it later became a garbage dump where refuse was burned. Gehenna became synonymous with "a place of burning"—a site used to dispose of useless things.

Only God can utterly destroy human existence and eliminate any hope of a resurrection. The Scriptures teach that God will in the future burn up the incorrigibly wicked in an all-consuming fire, turning them to ashes (Malachi 4:3)—annihilating them forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:23: Spirit, soul and body?

Many are confused by an expression the apostle Paul uses in one of his letters to the Thessalonians: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

What does Paul mean by the phrase "spirit, soul, and body"?

By "spirit" (pneuma), Paul means the non-material component that is joined to the physical human brain to form the human mind. This spirit is not conscious of itself. Rather, it gives the brain the ability to reason, create and analyze our existence (see also Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). By "soul" (psuche), Paul means the person's physical being with its consciousness. By "body" (soma), Paul means a physical body of flesh. In short, Paul wished for the whole person, including the mind, vitality of conscious life and physical body, to be sanctified and blameless.

Revelation 6:9-10: Souls of slain crying out?

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Revelation 6:9-10).

To understand this scripture, we must remember the context. John was witnessing a vision while he was "in the Spirit" (Revelation 4:2). Under inspiration he was seeing future events depicted in symbolism. The fifth seal is figurative of the Great Tribulation, a time of world turmoil preceding Christ's return. In this vision, John sees under the altar the martyred

believers who sacrificed their lives for their faith in God. These souls figuratively cry out, "Avenge our blood!" This can be compared to Abel's blood metaphorically crying out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Though neither dead souls nor blood can actually speak, these phrases figuratively demonstrate that a God of justice will not forget the evil deeds of mankind perpetrated against His righteous followers.

This verse does not describe living souls that have gone to heaven. The Bible confirms that "no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven [Jesus Christ]" (John 3:13). Even righteous King David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), was described by Peter as being "dead and buried" (Acts 2:29), not alive in heaven or some other state or location (verse 34).

The History of the Immortal-Soul Teaching

Despite widespread use of the phrase immortal soul, this terminology is found nowhere in the Bible. Where did the idea of an immortal soul originate?

The concept of the soul's supposed immortality was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. "The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is... speculation... nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture... The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended" (Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941, Vol. 6, "Immortality of the Soul," pp. 564, 566).

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the "immortal soul" separate at death. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia comments on ancient Israel's view of the soul: "We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

Early Christianity was influenced and corrupted by Greek philosophies as it spread through the Greek and Roman world. By A.D. 200 the doctrine of the immortality of the soul became a controversy among Christian believers.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology notes that Origen, an early and influential Catholic theologian, was influenced by Greek thinkers: "Speculation about the soul in the sub apostolic church was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. This is seen in Origen's acceptance of Plato's doctrine of the preexistence of the soul as pure mind (nous) originally, which, by reason of its fall from God, cooled down to soul (psyche) when it lost its participation in the divine fire by looking earthward" (1992, "Soul," p. 1037).

Secular history reveals that the concept of the immortality of the soul is an ancient belief embraced by many pagan religions. But it's not a biblical teaching and is not found in either the Old or New Testaments.

Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep

What happens to a person when he dies? The Bible compares death to a state of sleep. It is not a normal "sleep," of course. It is a sleep in which there is no thought, brain activity or life whatsoever. Passages throughout the Bible show this to be the case.

For example, Ecclesiastes 9 states, "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing . . . For there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verses 5, 10).

Daniel 12:2 describes the dead as "those who sleep in the dust of the earth," who later "shall awake" through being resurrected.

Job speaks of the state of the dead on more than one occasion. "Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? . . . For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest. . . There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest" (Job 3:11, 13, 17).

Many centuries later the biblical account of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, illustrates death to be a sleeplike state. "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany" (John 11:1). Jesus decided to go to him, but, so He could perform a miracle to strengthen His disciples' faith, He waited until Lazarus died.

Before going to Bethany, Jesus discussed the condition of Lazarus with His disciples. He told them Lazarus was asleep and that He was going to awaken him (John 11:11-14). The disciples responded that sleep was good because it would help him get well (verse 12). Jesus then plainly told them, "Lazarus is dead" (verse 14). Notice that Jesus stated emphatically that Lazarus was dead, but at the same time He described death as a condition like sleep. When the time came for Jesus to act, "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes. . . Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go'" (verses 43-44).

Lazarus had not gone to heaven or hell. He had been entombed, where he "slept" in death until Jesus called him out of the grave by a miraculous resurrection.

Like Lazarus, everyone enters a figurative state of sleep at death. The dead are unconscious. The common belief is that at death the body goes to the grave and the soul remains conscious and goes either to heaven or hell. Yet as we have seen, this belief is not biblical.

In another reference that describes the state of the dead, Paul refers to the righteous dead who will be resurrected to meet Christ in the air as being “asleep”:

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

So those who are in their graves will be resurrected, rising to meet the returning Messiah along with His followers who are then still alive. They all will be caught up in the air to meet Christ in the first resurrection. They will then return to the earth to reign with Him in the Kingdom of God. That the dead are figuratively in a state of sleep, awaiting the resurrection, “was the prevalent opinion until as late as the 5th century” (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 35). The change away from the biblical teaching occurred several centuries after Christ. The plain teaching of the Bible is that the dead are unconscious, waiting in the grave. They are, as Jesus and Paul put it, sleeping. They will not awake until the resurrection.

Even Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, wrote at one point: “It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment . . . On what authority can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep . . . in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their down lying at night and their uprising in the morning?” (Letter to Nicholas Amsdorf, Jan. 13, 1522, quoted in Jules Michelet, *The Life of Luther*, translated by William Hazlitt, 1862, p. 133). Yet the Reformation did not embrace the truth that the dead sleep in total unawareness. Eventually all will arise from this sleep. As Jesus said, the hour is coming “in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). This is the comforting and encouraging truth revealed in the Scriptures.

The Spirit in Man

Human beings do have a spiritual component to our makeup. As Job 32:8 says, “There is a spirit in man.” Zechariah 12:1 tells us that God “forms the spirit of man within him.” And the apostle Paul pointed out, “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

It is this human spirit that imparts human intellect to our physical brains, creating the human mind. This is what makes people vastly more intelligent than animals.

Yet this spiritual aspect of human existence is nothing like the immortal soul concept. It is something distinctly different. The spirit in man is not animate of itself. It is not a spirit entity

that “lives on” after death. As Scripture shows, the human spirit has no consciousness apart from the body, for man is mortal. When we die, we will have no awareness of anything at all. Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us that, at death, “the spirit returns to God who gave it”—where it is retained until the future time when God places those individual spirits within new bodies at the resurrection, thereby bringing individuals back to life with their personality and memories preserved and intact.

The human spirit is critical to our destiny, since God’s Holy Spirit joining with it is what makes us God’s children (Romans 8:16). And just as the human spirit gives us human understanding, so God’s Spirit gives us higher, godly understanding (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). We are not born with the Holy Spirit but receive it from God following repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38).

Will a Loving God Punish People Forever in Hell?

Take this simple test. Or perhaps it’s better if you just imagined it, since the actual test would prove quite painful.

Light a match, then hold your finger in its tiny flame for five seconds. What happens? You’ll likely scream involuntarily and suffer misery for several days from a painful burn.

Perhaps you’ve seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrible accident, his flesh gnarled and misshapen. Imagine being trapped in flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. What would that kind of agony feel like if it went on for a minute? For a year? For a lifetime? For ever and ever?

Most people would find the idea horrifying almost beyond imagination. They would understandably be aghast and sickened that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to accept the idea that the God they worship and hold in highest esteem would willingly inflict such punishment not on just a few, but on a great multitude of people who die every single day? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible’s description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

Just what is the truth about hell?

Hell through the centuries

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries.

Perhaps one of the earliest to expound this view among Christians was the Catholic theologian Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage also wrote: “The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end” (quoted by Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This belief has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: "Whoever says or thinks that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal...let him be anathema" (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed its belief in eternal torture of the wicked in these words: "The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil" (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: "Christ will return...to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment" (Toon, p. 131).

Teachings on the subject of hell have by no means been consistent through the centuries. Beliefs about hell have varied widely, depending on which theologian's or church historian's ideas one reads. Generally speaking, the most common belief has been that hell is a place in which wicked people are tortured forever, but never consumed, by ever-burning flames. Hell's location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have believed it to be in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber. The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but rather in the 14th-century work *The Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In the first part of this work, called "The Inferno," Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (*U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II "declared that hell is 'not a punishment imposed externally by God' but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner's choice to live apart from God" (*ibid.*, p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved. Why do we see so much diversity in beliefs about hell? Like belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are rife with the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible.

The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

An angry God

One of the most graphic descriptions of the torments of hell as conceived by men was given by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in a 1741 sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

He said: “The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrows made ready...[by] an angry God...It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction! The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire...

“You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him...and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment...

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God...You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.”

This human concept of hell was so terrible that the prospect of such a fate caused great anguish, fear and anxiety for many Puritans. “The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent” (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 284).

The Puritans were not the only ones tormented by fear of hell. Many people have been terrorized by the thought of hell ever since this non-biblical concept crept into religious teaching. Other ministers and teachers have, like Jonathan Edwards, used a similar approach to frighten people into belief and obedience.

One of the reasons this concept of hell survived is because theologians believed the teaching deterred people from evil. “It was thought that, if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever and that society would collapse into an anarchical orgy” (Walker, p. 4). Could a compassionate God torture people forever?

Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people through the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

God is a God of love who does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (verse 45). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully torments evil people for all eternity—not a few decades or even centuries, but for an infinite length of time.

The idea that God sentences people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: “Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete...I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe...will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine” (quoted by Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this “damnable doctrine,” but that men have misunderstood what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will be able to witness the torments of the wicked. As one author explains the view some hold, “part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God’s justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss” (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa, relishing in it. Husbands and wives would feel joy in seeing unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic, cruel and merciless.

Those who insist that the Bible teaches eternal torment by fire should ask whether such a belief is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God. For example, how could God justly deal with those who have lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be saved? This would include the millions who died as babies as well as the billions of unbelievers or idolaters who lived and died never knowing God or His Son. Regrettably, the vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category.

Some theologians reason around this difficulty by assuming that those who never had the opportunity to know God or hear the name of Jesus Christ will be given a sort of free pass. The rationale is that since their state of ignorance is due to circumstances beyond their control, God will admit them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. If true, this raises a troubling possibility—that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings being lost!

Quandaries such as this have painted many theologians and other Christians into a corner. Accordingly, some have challenged the traditional concept of a hell of eternal torment through the centuries. “In every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment” (Four Views on Hell, William Crockett, editor, 1996, p. 140). Nevertheless, as we have seen, church councils through the ages have upheld the doctrine.

Firmly rooted in traditional Christian belief, it's an idea that will not go away. A U.S. News and World Report poll from not too long ago shows that more Americans believe in hell today than in the 1950s or even the 1980s and early 1990s (Jan. 31, 2000, p. 46).

The prospect of hell will continue to haunt people. As U.S. News and World Report concluded, "Hell's powerful images will no doubt continue to loom over humanity, as they have for more than 2,000 years, as a grim and ominous reminder of the reality of evil and its consequences."

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