

The State of Man in Death

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Introduction

Most Christians believe that God created man with an immortal soul, or spirit, which survives the death of the body. According to this belief, after a person dies, his body decays while his immortal soul goes immediately to its reward, either heaven or hell (or purgatory). Then at the resurrection of the body at the Second Coming of Christ, Jesus brings back all of the immortal souls who had previously gone to heaven and reunites them with their former, albeit glorified, bodies. These glorified bodies contain no disease or physical weakness, but are perfect physical bodies in every way. During the interim between death and the resurrection—which theologians refer to as the intermediate state—the more traditional view, held by a majority of believers, holds that the immortal souls of the saved are in a disembodied state, which means that they have no bodies. A minority, however, believes that immortal souls receive celestial bodies befitting life in the celestial environment of heaven.

Historically, the idea of an immortal soul is very old, with almost all ancient and modern world religions holding such a doctrine. As a philosophy, it is based on a concept called anthropological dualism. In Western civilization it originated with the Greek philosopher Socrates (470-399 B.C.) as written by his famous student Plato (ca. 427-347 B.C.), both from Athens (in Greece). The concept is that all things, living and non-living, consist of physical matter and an immaterial form (called the Theory of Forms), with matter being inherently inferior and forms being perfect and eternal. For human beings, the form is called the soul, and it is perfect, eternal, and immortal. This, Plato taught, is the very essence of a human being.

The great Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were heavily influenced by this Platonic philosophy. By Jesus' day most Jews believed in the immortal soul. Christianity appears to have originally rejected the concept but was influenced through the writings of Augustine (A.D. 354-430), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine was impressed with Plato's basic lines of arguments, including his support for the immortality of the soul. Of course, Augustine incorporated the Christian concept of God and creation with Platonic thought, and thereby helped make the immortality of the soul a popular teaching within the Christian Church.

The person who believes in the immortality of the soul objects that only the physical body dies, while the immortal soul survives because it is not subject to death. Therefore, all those Scriptural texts speaking of a future immortality are interpreted as applying only to bodily immortality.

Part of our objection to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is philosophical and stems from the fact it is allegedly an immaterial entity. At least Plato was consistent because he correctly taught that all immaterial entities (forms) are not only perfect but they are also eternal. This is true because anything immaterial must by definition exist outside of time and space, for everything within time and space is essentially material in nature. We now know that even electromagnetic energy, including light, possesses certain material qualities. This is the philosophical reason for the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim belief that God is eternal since He is a spiritual Being (spirit; John 4:24). However, as the essence of a human being, the immortal soul would be eternal in nature and thus God. Therefore, for Christians to believe that people have an immortal soul is actually to believe that their essence is Divine, a conclusion that is actually abhorrent to Christians and rightly so. Nevertheless, that is the unmistakable conclusion if one believes in an immaterial, immortal soul.

To avoid this conclusion, it is claimed that God creates an eternal, immortal soul for each person at his or her conception. However, that does not work as a solution either since even God cannot create something that is already eternal, for by definition that which is eternal had no beginning. Moreover, if it is claimed that God takes a “piece” of His own eternal nature and places it in a human fetus, that would mean that God becomes less Divine. But that is impossible, for Divine nature is eternal and thus unchangeable. Therefore, His nature is indivisible and cannot be divided.

At this point we will turn to the Holy Scriptures to determine what they teach. Philosophy can take a person only so far and is subject to fallible human reason. Therefore, as for all things, the Scriptures are the foundation to determine what to believe about human nature.

Essence of Human Nature

To understand the essence of human nature, we need to return to its origins as described in the Bible. This takes us to Genesis 2:7, a description of what God did to create the first human being: *And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [soul]*. The Hebrew word for *being* here is the same one that is most often translated as *soul* elsewhere in the Old Testament. In other words, man does not *have* a soul but he *is* a soul. When he dies, *Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it* (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The Hebrew word for spirit here essentially means *air*. The spirit is therefore the breath of life, as a check of the parallel phrases in Job 33:4 and in Isaiah 42:5 show:

*The Spirit of God has made me,
And the breath of the Almighty gives me life* (Job 33:4).

Who [God] gives breath to the people on it,

And spirit to those who walk on it (Isaiah 42:5).

Therefore, when a person dies, the two elements of dust and breath (spirit) return to their original sources, one (dust) to the earth and the other (spirit) to God. Since the spirit of man is the breath or spark of life, it does not contain the essence of a person, nor is it immortal. Rather, it is the activating principle that gives life, the ability to think and to move. This can be illustrated in a couple of ways. First, when you turn off the electric current to a light bulb, the electricity returns to its circuit; it is not the essence of the light bulb or the light itself. Second, if a person notices five long metal bars on the ground, along with some chains and a seat, he recognizes those as parts of a swing set. But the swing set does not exist unless and until someone connects all of its parts together in the correct way. In the meantime, by looking at the individual parts one can discover that there is no such thing as the essence of the swing set. Thus, if you take an existing swing set apart, the swing set simply ceases to exist just as the light in the light bulb ceases to exist when you turn off the electricity.

The Scriptures teach that animals have the same spirit (breath) that people do (Ecclesiastes 3:19), yet no Christian argues that animals possess an immortal spirit or soul. Besides, Ezekiel 18:4 declares that a soul (the whole person) can die. If that is true, then a person cannot be said to possess innate immortality within his nature.

An objection is made that Revelation's statement that there are souls under the altar in heaven means that we have immortal souls. That reference is found in Revelation 6:9-10: *I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God...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?'*

First, confinement of the alleged souls of martyrs at the base of an altar is hardly a literal picture. Second, the symbolism is explained by the Old Testament sanctuary system, in which the blood of sacrificial animals was partly poured out at the base of the Altar of Burnt Offering or Sacrifice (Exodus 29:10-13; 38:1; 40:6, 10, 29; Leviticus 4:7, 10, 18, 25, 30, 34). Leviticus 17:11 says that the soul (or life) of a sacrificial animal is in its blood. So when the blood was poured at the base of the altar, it was the same thing as its soul (or life) being poured there. Therefore, this language symbolically points to Christian martyrs as having been "sacrificed" to God and says nothing about the state of man in death. The statement in Revelation 6:9-10 reflects the parallel of Abel's voice crying out from the ground in Genesis 4:10.

Conditional Immortality

Many Christians object to our view because the Scriptures teach that death came as a result of sin, which means there was no death before sin entered the world. The conclusion, then, is that Adam

and Eve must have possessed immortality before they sinned. All of that is not only logical but Biblical. Clearly, the Bible teaches that death came as a result of sin. *Through one man [Adam] sin entered the world, and death through sin* (Romans 5:12; cf. v. 17 and I Corinthians 15:56). Paul also states the same truth in Romans 6:23 when he declared that *the wages of sin is death*.

However, according to Genesis 3:22-24, God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden so they would not have access to the Tree of Life and live forever. This is called *conditional immortality*—conditional upon their passing the test of loyalty and continuing to have access to the Tree of Life. But when they failed their test, they lost their immortality because they lost their access to the source of that immortality. Now, of course, God is the ultimate Source of immortality. But in some way, eating of the fruit of the Tree of Life was necessary for them to maintain their immortality. This truth implicitly means that God did not create mankind with *innate* (or intrinsic) immortality, that is, immortality that is a permanent part of their nature.

Mankind was guilty of sin, so they eventually died. If only his physical body dies, however, while his alleged immortal soul lives on, then only his body must have been guilty of sin. But the Scriptures do not teach such a view of sin. On the contrary, sin begins in the mind with one's inner desires. James 1:14-15 states that *one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death*. This is the reason why character transformation, made necessary because of sin, consists of being *transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Romans 12:2).

Plainly, then, the guilt of sin is primarily mental rather than physical, although sin is often acted out in the physical realm. In truth, the whole person is guilty of sin. Therefore, if God only deprived Adam and Eve of physical immortality because of their sin, then God made a terrible mistake. Because Adam and Eve were guilty as whole persons, then God should have deprived them of immortality of their entire persons. Of course, we know that God does not make mistakes. Therefore, He did indeed take away their conditional immortality as whole persons.

In harmony with our conclusions, the Bible teaches that God alone has immortality within His very nature (I Timothy 1:7; 6:15-17). Even believers *seek* immortality (Romans 2:7). One does not seek what he already possesses. Therefore, no human being on earth has immortality. In one sense we already possess eternal life and that is by relationship with Jesus. I John 5:11-13 says that eternal life is in Jesus, which we possess only in a positive relationship with Him: *God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life*. However, that eternal life (or immortality) will not actually reside in us until it is received at the end of the age at Jesus' Second Coming (Matthew 25:46; Mark 10:30; Titus 1:2; 3:7).

Sometimes John 11:26 is understood to mean that the believer is no longer subject to death: *And*

whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. We need to examine this passage. In John 11:25, Jesus acknowledges that a believer *may die* (v. 25), but He quickly adds that *he shall live* (v. 25) in the context of His statement that *I [He, Jesus] am the resurrection and the life* (v. 25). Thus, Jesus is teaching that even when believers die, they will be raised in the resurrection. But what did He mean when He declared that His followers *shall never die* (v. 26) when in the same breath He acknowledged that they *may die*?

The answer to that question is found in another New Testament book written by the same author: *He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death* (Revelation 2:11). According to Revelation 20:11-15, the second death is the death of the wicked at the end of the millennium, and from which there is no resurrection. In other words, it is eternal death because those who die this death will remain dead throughout eternity. But if there is a *second* death, there must be a *first* death. Therefore, everyone dies the first death, but only the wicked will die the second death. Because Jesus' words are not in conflict with other Scriptures, He must be referring to this second death, or eternal death, in contrast to eternal life, when He said that His followers *shall never die*. In this way, there is perfect harmony in God's Word.

The Biblical Meaning of Soul and Spirit

There is a sense in which the words for *soul* and *spirit* are used in the Scriptures beyond what we have already discussed—the soul as representing the whole person and the spirit as representing the breath or spark of life. We must examine the usage meanings of these words in Scripture if we are to be thorough in our analysis of what the Bible teaches concerning mankind's nature. For the sake of continuity we will include their usages when they refer to the whole person or the breath of life as well.

Soul

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *nephesh* (for *soul*) occurs 754 times. Although it is translated 45 different ways in the King James' Version, the same version translates it as *soul* 472 times, including in Genesis 2:7. With two exceptions (Job 30:15 and Isaiah 57:16), it is the only Hebrew word translated as *soul*. Perhaps the most important fact about this word is that the adjective *immortal* is never used to describe it. Rather, the word *nephesh*, when applied to human beings, is used principally as a reference (1) to the whole person, who is subject to death, (2) to life, which is fragile and subject to death, (3) to a person's center of emotions, and (4) to a person's center of the will or intellect, as seen below through a representative sample of Old Testament passages. The English words in each category below are the ones used in the New King James' Version's translation of *nephesh*.

The Whole Person—*people* (Genesis 12:5, Joshua 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39); *persons* (Genesis

14:21; 46:27, Exodus 1:5); *body* (Leviticus 21:11, Numbers 5:2; 6:6, 11; 9:6, 7, 10; 19:11, 13, Haggai 2:13); *corpse* (Leviticus 22:4); *dead* (Leviticus 19:28; 21:1); *soul(s)* (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). *Life—life* (Exodus 4:19, I Samuel 23:15, II Kings 7:7, Psalm 17:13); *lives* (Joshua 2:13; 9:24, Esther 8:9); *soul* (Psalms 143:11).

Center of Emotions—soul (II Kings 4:27, Job 19:2, Psalms 6:3-4; 42:2; 57:1; 62:1; 63:1; 84:2; 107:5, 26; 119:28, 81).

Center of the Will or Intellect—person (Leviticus 4:2; 5:1, Numbers 15:30); *soul(s)* (Ezekiel 18:4, Micah 6:7).

The passages above not only do *not* suggest that the soul is immortal, but they plainly teach that the soul is frail and subject to death. Nevertheless, those who believe in the immortality of the soul object on the basis of two Old Testament passages which speak of the departure and/or return of the soul in a person which dies and/or is resurrected to life. Our brief examination of these two passages follows.

And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin (Genesis 35:18).

This text concerns the birth of Benjamin to Rachel and Jacob. Does the expression *as her soul was departing* mean that Rachel's immortal soul was in the process of leaving the body at her death? First, to draw such a conclusion would contradict the plain testimony of Scripture that the soul is frail and subject to death because it represents the essence of the whole person. And it is not proper to use rather obscure passages to interpret the plain ones. Second, it is important to note that the Hebrew word *nephesh* (*soul*) is derived from a verb meaning *to breathe*. Remember that in Genesis 2:7 man became a living soul when the breath of life was given to his body. Thus, when the breath leaves the body, a person becomes a dead soul. From this evidence, it is apparent that the expression *as her soul was departing* is a metaphor for death. This conclusion is reinforced by the second Old Testament passage about the return of the soul constituting the resurrection of the whole person:

...let this child's soul come back to him. Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived (I Kings 17:21-22).

This passage concerns the role that the prophet Elijah played in the resurrection of the widow's son at Zarephath. Verse 17 tells us that the boy had died by saying that *there was no breath in him*. This explicit mention of death as the cessation of breathing leads logically to the conclusion that the departure of the soul is the departure of the breath because the act of breathing is the outward sign of the living soul. Thus, when the boy was resurrected, his soul returned to him in

the sense that his breath returned, and breathing is the outward sign of a living soul. This conclusion is given even greater weight by the literal Hebrew in verse 21, that the soul would return to *his inward parts*. The *breath* exists there in the sense that it is what activates the vital organs of the body. Therefore, it is clear that the expressions referring to the departure and return of the soul are metaphors for death and resurrection of the whole person, respectively.

In the New Testament, *psuche* is the Greek word translated as *soul*. It is also the equivalent of the Hebrew word *nephesh* in that it is derived from a Greek verb meaning *to breathe*. Its four main meanings in the New Testament, when applied to human beings, are as references (1) to the whole person, (2) to a person's center of emotions, (3) to life, and (4) to eternal life. The words in parenthesis behind each text are from the New King James' Version. The following are only representative samples:

The Whole Person—*soul(s)* (Acts 2:41, 43; 3:23, Romans 13:1, I Peter 3:20); *people* (Acts 7:14).

Center of Emotions—*soul* (Matthew 22:37; 26:38, Mark 12:30; 14:34, Luke 1:46; 10:27, John 12:27, Revelation 18:14); *heart* (Ephesians 6:6); *heartily* (Colossians 3:23).

Life—*life* (Matthew 2:20; 6:25, Mark 3:4, Luke 6:9; 12:22, 23; 14:26, John 10:11, 15, 17; 15:13, Acts 20:24; 27:22, Romans 11:3, Philippians 2:30, I John 3:16); *lives* (Acts 15:26; 27:10, I Thessalonians 2:8, I John 3:16, Revelation 12:11). When associated with this present life, the Greek *psuche* (or *soul*) especially applies to the physical aspect of man. Note that in Matthew 6:25, Jesus warns, *do not worry about your life [soul], what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life [the soul] more than food and the body more than clothing?* Because food and drink clearly apply to the physical nature of man, so does the Greek word *psuche* (*soul*). Equally clear is the apostle Paul's statement in I Corinthians 15:44, speaking of the contrast between the present physical body and the new body at the resurrection of the righteous: *It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body*. The Greek word translated *natural*, which speaks of the present physical body in this lifetime, is *psuchikos*, which is the adjective form of *psuche*. It literally means *soul-ish*. In this way, the human soul is clearly identified with the physical nature of mankind, a physical nature which is subject to death. Thus, the soul is not immortal.

Eternal Life—In the New Testament, Jesus expanded the meaning of the *soul* (or *psuche*) by extending its meaning of *life* to that of eternal life. This is clear in the following representative statement:

He who loves his life [soul] will lose it, and he who hates his life [soul] in this world will keep it for eternal life [*zoe*, as in *zoology*]. (John 12:25; cf. Matthew 10:39; 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24; 17:33; and 21:19; cf. verse 16).

The contrast in the above text between *this world* and *eternal life* demonstrates that the Greek word for *soul* (*psuche*) is being used of both the present life, which is subject to death, and of eternal life. Jesus' statement makes it clear that the soul cannot be immortal because it is the life which comes from God which, depending on the attitude of the person, may or may not be converted to eternal life. If the soul were really immortal, then Jesus' words here would be completely meaningless.

This meaning of *psuche* (*soul*) as eternal life explains the following text:

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)

The fact that *body* and *soul* are contrasted in the above text is often viewed as supporting the classical dualism of body and soul in which the soul is immortal. But obviously this is not the meaning of the text because Jesus emphatically declares that God can indeed kill the soul; in fact, only God can do so. Thus, the soul is not immortal. The meaning of this text then becomes clear in light of the expanded meaning of *psuche* as eternal life: *Do not fear those who can kill your body but not deny you eternal life; but fear God who is able to destroy your entire being forever.* A comparison check with Luke 12:4-5, a parallel passage, confirms our interpretation: *do not be afraid of those who kill the body...Fear Him, who after He has killed, has power to cast into hell.*

Spirit

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ruach* is by far the most popular word translated as *spirit* in the English translations of the Bible. Its essential meaning is *air, wind, or air in motion*. It occurs 389 times and is applied in three major ways: (1) to the power of the wind 113 times; (2) to God 136 times; and (3) to men, animals, and false gods 129 times. We learned earlier that the normal Hebrew words for *breath* (as in Genesis 2:7) and *spirit* (which is *ruach*) are used interchangeably in the Old Testament. Compare also Job 27:3; 32:8, and 34:14-15. However, there are indications that the two words have slightly different connotations.

For example, the literal Hebrew of Genesis 7:22 reads, *the breath of the spirit [ruach] of life*. This implies that the breath of life, which humans and animals both possess, is part of the larger *spirit [ruach] of life*. Undoubtedly, this larger *spirit [ruach]* is God's Spirit (Holy Spirit) which provides the breath of life to all living creatures. This conclusion is supported by the fact that, although the term *nephesh* (*soul*) is rarely applied to God, the term *ruach* [*spirit*] is applied to God more often than to human beings. Therefore, the *ruach* [*spirit*] is a divine as well as a human term. But does this necessarily mean that the spirit is a distinct, nonmaterial, and immortal aspect of man's nature? We explore this question by discovering how the spirit is used when applied to human nature. Chiefly, the spirit in man's nature is (1) the activating principle of life, or life itself, (2) the center

of emotions, and (3) the spiritual attitude toward God.

Principle of Life (or Life itself)—In Lamentations 4:20, Jeremiah pictures the seizure of King Zedekiah by the Babylonians as the taking of the nation’s [Judah’s] *life*: “The breath [*ruach*] of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord, was caught in their [Babylon] pits....” In Judges 15:19 and I Samuel 30:12, the *ruach* [*spirit* and *strength*, respectively] is associated with the physical revival of human beings. And in Ezekiel 37:5, 6, 9-10, *ruach* [*breath*] is God’s Holy Spirit who enters the dry bones and resurrects the people of God. Whether this passage is speaking of a literal or spiritual resurrection is irrelevant for our subject here because from a language perspective, *ruach* is obviously associated with that which causes the dead people to breathe again. Therefore, it is clear that *ruach* is used to describe the activating principle of life, or physical life itself.

Center of Emotions—Like the Hebrew word *nephesh* [*soul*], *ruach* [*spirit*] sometimes functions in the Old Testament to describe a person’s center of emotions. See Joshua 2:11 (*courage*), Judges 8:3 (*anger*), Psalms 34:18 (*spirit*), Proverbs 14:29 (*impulsive*), 16:32 (*spirit*), Ecclesiastes 7:9 (*spirit*), 10:4 (*spirit*), Isaiah 54:6 (*spirit*), and Ezekiel 3:14 (*spirit*).

Spiritual Attitude Toward God—Two key Old Testament passages testify to the truth that the term *ruach* sometimes refers to a person’s spiritual attitude toward God:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit [*ruach*] within me (Psalms 51:10).

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit [*ruach*] within you (Ezekiel 36:26; cf. Ezekiel 11:19 and 18:31). Verse 27 adds that it is the Holy Spirit who gives the new attitude to people, who then *walk in My [God’s] statutes, and...keep My judgments and do them*.

There is no indication whatsoever in Scripture that the principle of life [*ruach*] makes a person inherently immortal. The adjective *immortal* never describes the spirit of man. Nevertheless, those who persist in believing that man possesses a part of his nature which is innately immortal point to the Old Testament texts which state that man’s spirit returns to God when he dies:

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

There are two very important reasons why the above text, and others similar to it, do not teach that man has an immortal spirit which survives death in some conscious state. First, Job 34:14-15 teaches that *all flesh* perish together when God takes back His spirit [*ruach*] and his breath, and man turns to dust. This means that the same thing happens to both the righteous and the wicked

when they die—specifically for our subject, that God takes back His spirit. But the supporters of innate immortality in mankind argue that the wicked go to hell while the righteous go to heaven at death. Thus, the evidence here does not seem to fit their view. Second, the Scripture teaches that animals possess the same *ruach* (*spirit*) as man does. See Genesis 6:17 (*breath*), 7:15 (*breath*), 7:22 (*spirit*, in the literal Hebrew text), Psalm 104:29 (*breath*), and Ecclesiastes 3:19 (*breath*), 21 (*spirit*). Psalm 104:29 speaks of fish but parallels Ecclesiastes 12:7 (see above, concerning humans):

You take away their breath [*ruach*], they die and return to their dust (cf. vv. 25-28 to see that it is speaking of sea creatures.)

The same thing which happens to mankind at death also happens to animals when they die. That is why Ecclesiastes 3:19 declares, *For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely they all have one breath [ruach].*

In the New Testament, the Greek word *pneuma*, from which the English word *pneumonia* is derived, is the standard word translated as *spirit*, and it is the equivalent of the Hebrew *ruach*. Therefore, the New Testament uses the word *spirit* [*pneuma*], when applied to human nature, to represent (1) the whole person, (2) the activating principle of life (or life itself), (3) the center of emotions, and (4) the spiritual attitude toward God, which is by far the majority usage of *pneuma* in the New Testament. Representative passages with the New King James' Version words appear below:

The Whole Person—spirit(s) (I John 4:1-3).

Principle of Life (or Life itself)—*spirit* (James 2:26); *breath* (Revelation 11:11).

Center of Emotions—*spirit* (Matthew 5:3, Luke 1:47); *spirit* as the *will* in Matthew 26:41.

Spiritual Attitude Toward God—*spirit* (Romans 1:9; 8:16, I Corinthians 2:11; 6:17, Galatians 6:18, Ephesians 4:23-24). Romans 8:16 is particularly clear on the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the spirit of a believer:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God....

The above verse illustrates the distinction between the Holy Spirit and a person's spirit, or spiritual nature, so that the two are not identical though they have a close relationship. The Holy Spirit is the reason why the believer has a right spirit toward God, but the person's spirit is not a divine spark of immortality within him. Rather, it is his attitude toward God made possible by accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, there is a "unity with distinction" principle operating here. As with the Old Testament word for *spirit* [*ruach*], there is not the slightest hint that the *pneuma*

[*spirit*] of a human being is a separate, conscious, immortal part of his nature which survives the death of the body.

Only Two Conditions Possible

The Scriptures describe only two different conditions that a person can find himself in. Paul declared in Romans 6:23 that *the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*. Jesus taught the same thing when He told Nicodemus, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*.

If death were the separation of the body and soul, which is what advocates of the immortality of the soul teach, then Paul and Jesus would be liars because death is not life somewhere else. Rather, both texts make a sharp contrast between death and life. Note that they did not say that the choice is between everlasting life in hell or eternal life with Jesus. Note also that eternal life (immortality) is a gift from God, not something that humans possess inherently within their nature.

Do the Righteous Dead Praise God?

The Bible plainly teaches that while *the living know that they will die...the dead know nothing* (Ecclesiastes 9:5). This means that the dead do not remember God (Psalms 6:5), they *do not praise the Lord* (Psalms 115:17; cf. 30:9), and when they die *their plans perish* (Psalms 146:4). It is quite evident, then, that human beings do not possess an immortal soul.

One Reason for the Return of Jesus

Jesus told His apostles, *I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also* (John 14:3). If people's souls go to be with Jesus in heaven immediately after death, then there would be no need for Jesus to return to get them. Therefore, this text proves that God's saved people do not go to be with Jesus immediately after death. Instead, they are in their graves awaiting the resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus. If, however, we had immortal souls, they would certainly go to heaven if the person belonged to Jesus.

Sleep Metaphor

Death is described as a sleep at least 66 times in 17 books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Those who teach the immortality of the soul insist that the body sleeps but not the soul. First, it is never appropriate to say that the body, apart from the mind, is unconscious because the issue of consciousness especially concerns the mind. Thus, it is the whole person who sleeps in death, although it is a dreamless sleep since there are no brain waves.

Second, sleep implies a later awakening in a resurrection. But what purpose is the resurrection if a person's soul has already gone to its eternal destiny? Finally, if there is no resurrection, the apostle Paul wrote, *And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished* (I Corinthians 15:17-18). If he understood that man has an immortal soul, we would have expected him to say that they would remain alive in hell forever. Instead, he says that without the resurrection, they would *have perished*, which means *to destroy fully*.

Absent from the Body and Present with the Lord

II Corinthians 5:1-8

In II Corinthians 5:1-8 the apostle Paul expressed his desire *to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord* (v. 8). This is taken to mean that after a believer dies he goes immediately to be with the Lord. By outlining the passage below we can better understand what Paul meant by his language.

<u>We Groan</u>	<u>We Desire</u>	<u>We Do Not Want</u>
<i>earthly house</i>	<i>building from God</i>	<i>naked</i>
<i>this tent</i>	<i>house not made with hands (in heaven)</i>	<i>unclothed</i>
<i>mortality</i>	<i>life (immortal life)</i>	
<i>in the body</i>	<i>absent from the body</i>	
<i>absent from the Lord</i>	<i>present with the Lord</i>	

The phrase *absent from the body* (in second column) means to be absent from the sin-affected body (represented in the first column) because it cannot be equal to *naked* or *unclothed* since those are things that we do not desire. Since the first column represents this life on earth, and the second column represents what we desire, then the third column, representing what we do not want worst of all, must refer to the condition in death. This means, then, that death does not place the believer in the presence of the Lord. This is confirmed by comparing II Corinthians 5:1-8 with Romans 8:22-23:

II Corinthians 5:1-8

we groan
the Spirit as a guarantee
earnestly desiring
further clothed

Romans 8:22-23

groan within ourselves
firstfruits
waiting for
redemption of our body

The *further clothed* experience (first column) associated with our future presence with the Lord is equated with the *redemption of our body*. Therefore, being with the Lord occurs only after we have received glorified bodies at the Second Coming of Jesus.

Philippians 1:23

Another text used to support the theology that a believer goes immediately after death to be with Jesus is Philippians 1:23: *For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ*. First, the Greek word for *depart* is derived from the word for *departure* in II Timothy 4:6, where both refer to Paul's imminent death. Second, in II Timothy 4:8 Paul's use of *that Day* and *His appearing* plainly refers to the Second Coming of Jesus as the time when the Lord will give him *the crown of righteousness*. This means that Paul understood that his death would not result in his immediate presence with the Lord, for the latter would occur at the Second Coming.

So why does he refer in Philippians 1:23 to his death (*depart*) and being *with Christ* as if the first event led immediately to the second event? We have learned that death is like a dreamless sleep. Thus, there is no consciousness of the passing of time for the one who dies. Instead, one moment he dies, and as far as his consciousness is concerned, the very next moment he is awake.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is used to support the idea that people live on after their death either in heaven or in hell. This story is recorded in Luke 16:19-31. If it is not a parable, as most scholars insist that it is not, then its details must be interpreted literally except where an obvious figure of speech is used, such as Abraham's bosom as a Jewish metaphor for heaven. But if it a parable, then we should focus on the one or two main spiritual points and ignore the details—in which this story says nothing about the state of man in death. It *is* a parable for several good reasons, despite the fact that the word parable is not used in this passage.

First, neither man is a disembodied spirit or soul because the Rich Man in Hades has *eyes* and a *tongue*, and Lazarus as is pictured as having a *finger* (vv. 22-24). In fact, the passage says that the Rich Man was buried, yet his body was in a place of torment. A body cannot be in the grave and in the traditional concept of hell at the same time. Second, the Rich Man pleads for Lazarus to come to him and cool his tongue by dipping the tip of his finger in water first (v. 24). It is absurd to assert that any water obtained by dipping the tip of the finger in water could possibly cool the tongue of anyone being tormented in the flames of hell. Finally, the story pictures the gulf between heaven and hell as sufficiently narrow for conversations to occur between people in both places. The obvious figurative language, along with contradictory language if this story were literal, makes this story a parable whether the word *parable* is present or not.

This parable has two major spiritual points. First, it is in this lifetime that a person determines his eternal destiny; there is no second chance at salvation after death (vv. 25-26). Second, when the Rich Man begs for Lazarus to be sent to his brothers so they may avoid hell, Jesus has Abraham tell him, *'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them'* (v. 29). The Rich Man protests by saying that if *one goes to them from the dead, they will repent* (v. 30). Then Jesus delivers His punchline to this sobering story: *If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead* (v. 31). Indeed, the Jewish leaders did not believe when the literal Lazarus was raised from the dead (John 11). More importantly, they did not believe when Jesus Himself rose from the dead. Therefore, this parable is not addressing the subject of death or hell at all. This means that we cannot draw any conclusions about either of them from this story.

The Witch of Endor

According to the story recorded in I Samuel 28:3-25, Saul had been rejected by God as king of Israel and was facing a major battle against the Philistines. Since Samuel was dead, Saul in desperation went to a witch to see if he could get advice from Samuel. This was the witch at Endor. However, it was not Samuel that he spoke to for several reasons. First, God had been emphatic in commanding that all witches and other mediums be executed in Israel (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11; cf. Isaiah 8:19). A merciful God would not place a death sentence on anyone attempting to communicate with the dead if it were actually possible to do so. Therefore, any spirits called up would be evil spirits or angels.

Second, I Samuel 28:6 states that God had stopped answering Saul by any means. Yet are we supposed to believe that God then used a means which He had condemned in order to speak to Saul? Third, we are told that *Saul perceived it was Samuel* (v. 14). Since demons can certainly change their appearance, the fact that Saul *perceived* the apparition to be Samuel means nothing. Finally, the text says that Samuel's *spirit ascended...out of the earth...is coming up* (vv. 13-14). But if the faithful Samuel had an immortal soul, it would have come *down* from heaven, not *up* from the earth. Verse 19 says that *tomorrow you and your sons will be with me*. Really? Would they end up in the same place that the prophet Samuel went if people went to their eternal reward at death? For all these reasons, the only viable conclusion is that Saul spoke with an evil spirit and not the prophet Samuel.

The Thief on the Cross

The objection to our position is made that Jesus promised a thief on a cross next to Him that, *Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise* (Luke 23:42-43). First, note that there was no punctuation of any kind in the original Greek texts; they were added centuries later by scholars who translated the Scriptures. Second, we know that the second comma in Jesus' reply

to the thief belongs *after* the word *today* rather than *before* it, because Jesus made His promise on Friday, but Jesus told Mary Magdalene on Sunday morning after His resurrection, *I have not yet ascended to My Father* (John 20:17). Therefore, if Jesus had not gone to Paradise even as early as Sunday morning, then He could not have been in heaven with the thief on Friday.

Spirits in Prison

Many well-meaning believers assert that while Jesus' body was in the tomb, His soul or spirit went to hell and preached to people there. The passage used to support this theory is I Peter 3:18-20, which reads in part, *being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison...in the days of Noah* (vv. 18-19). Did Jesus' spirit, when His body was in the tomb, go and preach to certain spirits in hell? First, we know that the word *Spirit* is the Holy Spirit because made alive is a clear reference to His resurrection (Romans 8:11); thus, it does not refer to Jesus' spirit. In other words, the text simply says that Jesus preached by the Holy Spirit through Noah to the people in Noah's day. This is confirmed by Peter's statement in II Peter 2:4-9, in reference to Noah's day, that the wicked who lost their lives in the Flood are reserved *under punishment for the day of judgment* (v. 9). Since their fate is sealed, it would have pointless for anyone to have preached to them in hell, assuming they were there already in the first place. Therefore, *the spirits in prison* refers to real flesh-and-blood people in Noah's day who were spiritual prisoners of Satan (Psalms 142:7).

Jesus Brings the Saints with Him at His Second Coming

Two passages in I Thessalonians are interpreted to mean that Jesus will bring the souls of the dead saints with Him when He returns at His Second Coming. I Thessalonians 4:14 states that *For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus*. First, the Greek for *so* means *in the same way or manner*, thus indicating that just as God raised Jesus from the dead and took Him to heaven, so He will raise the dead in Christ and take them to heaven. This is confirmed by the subsequent verses (vv. 16-18) that declare the resurrection occurs first and is then followed by the bringing of the saints into the presence of Jesus. Second, the following diagram illustrates this truth:

- A For if we believe that Jesus died
- B and [Jesus] rose again
- B¹ God will bring with Him
- A¹ those who sleep in Jesus

Finally, these facts are used by Paul to comfort the saints (v. 18). If God's people's souls went immediately to heaven upon the death of the body, we should have expected Paul to comfort them by telling them so. Instead, the comfort is the knowledge that our loved ones are awaiting the

resurrection.

In I Thessalonians 3:13, the apostle Paul declares his hope that *He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints*. Note also Jesus' words: When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him (Matthew 24:31). First, this text in I Thessalonians 3 would clearly contradict what Paul wrote just one chapter later if the interpretation that Jesus will bring the souls of the deceased saints with Him at His Second Coming. Second, the Greek word for *saints* can also be translated as *holy ones*. Matthew's gospel above tells us that all the *holy angels* will come with Jesus at His return. Therefore, the saints in I Thessalonians 3 must be the angels that accompany Jesus.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

In Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27, and Luke 20:27-40, some Sadducees came to Jesus in order to challenge the truth of the resurrection because they did not believe in it. To do this, they invented a scenario which would make the resurrection seem foolish and impossible. In their story, a married man with several brothers died without leaving a male heir. In harmony with Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), the next brother married the woman in order to give her a son to continue the family line. But he died without a son. So the next brother married her and so on until she had married all seven brothers.

At this point, the Sadducees asked Jesus who this woman would be married to after the resurrection. Part of Jesus' reply was a quote from Exodus 3:6, where the Lord had spoken to Moses at the burning bush in Midian: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (quoted in Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37). Then Jesus added that *He is not the God of the dead, but of the living* (Matthew 22:32; Mark 12:27; Luke 20:38).

Advocates of the immortality of the soul conclude that Jesus' statement referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not being the *God of the dead, but of the living* means that the souls of those patriarchs must be alive in heaven. However, this ignores the context of the entire discussion about whether or not there is a resurrection. Note the specific language that Jesus used to introduce His statement that God was the God of the living rather than of the dead:

But concerning the resurrection of the dead... (Matthew 22:31).

But concerning the dead, that they rise... (Mark 12:26).

But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised... (Luke 20:37).

Clearly, then, if we are to believe Jesus' own words, He proved the resurrection by His quoting from Exodus 3:6. But how did He do this? He could not have identified Himself with the dead patriarchs unless He anticipated the resurrection. As for Luke 20:38's added comment, *for all live to Him*, the future is as clear and certain to the eternal God as is the present. Thus, *He gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did* (Romans 4:17).

Near-Death Experiences

Modern advocates of the immortality of the soul cite numerous near-death experiences that many people have had as proof that the soul lives on after the death of the body. While there is much that we still do not know about the human brain, we do know that when it is partially deprived of oxygen, during some traumatic circumstances such as surgery, a person can hallucinate. Therefore, near-death experiences (NDEs) prove nothing about the state of man in death. More importantly, John 11 tells the story of Jesus resurrecting His friend Lazarus after he had been dead for four days. Not only did Lazarus say nothing about heaven, neither did he complain about being brought back from the glories of heaven to the relatively dark earth. That seems to speak volumes.

Holistic View of Man's Nature

The experiential evidence concerns the obvious relationship of a person's physical, mental, and emotional health to each other. We all know that when we are physically ill, it is more difficult to concentrate on a specific task than when we are feeling better. Usually, physical illness also affects our emotional mood because most people tend to exercise less patience and feel more frustration under such circumstances. Medical science has also demonstrated the relationship between stress levels and numerous physiological changes in the human body. Even the old adage that "laughter is the best medicine" has been validated by a number of medical research studies. In other words, the physical, mental, and emotional components of human nature interact with each other in rather remarkable ways. This is common sense evidence that human nature is not composed of distinct and separate aspects that have no influence on each other. Or, put another way, it is powerful evidence that human beings are holistic creatures. If the classical dualism of body and soul were true, we would not expect to find a holistic relationship existing among the various aspects of human nature. The fact that we do find such a relationship argues persuasively against the dualistic view, in which the body and soul are so distinct and separate that the soul can even survive the death of the body.

The philosophical evidence is perhaps even more intriguing in light of twentieth century scientific discoveries. In dualism, the soul is the non-material essence of the human being. It is also typically believed, though not by all Christian dualists, that the soul is trapped by the physical body and is released from its bondage at the death of the body. But how strange it would be that a physical body would have the ability to contain a non-material essence! If the soul were actually the distinct

non-material essence of human nature, it could not be limited by anything consisting of matter. Besides, referring to the soul's release from the body at death as a worthy goal denies the Biblical truth that the body, along with all physical creation, was designed and created by God, and that He will bodily resurrect people at the end of the age. What need is there of the resurrection of the body if the souls of dead people go to heaven or hell (or purgatory) first? It makes the relationship of the immortal soul and the bodily resurrection essentially meaningless. If the doctrine of the immortality of the soul were true, then Jesus will bring the souls of the dead saved ones with Him at His Second Coming, resurrect their bodies, and then reunite the correct souls with their bodies. Does that sound like a God of order? We think not.

Conclusion

After a thorough examination of the Biblical data regarding the nature of man and death, it is clear that man does not have an immortal soul. The following summary statements stand out as the primary reasons for rejecting the dualistic belief in an immortal soul:

- The Creation account states that the whole person *is* a living soul, *not* that he *has* a soul. This is the reason that the Bible also speaks of dead men as dead souls (Leviticus 19:28, *dead*; 21:1, *dead*, 11, *dead body*; 22:4, *corpse*; Numbers 5:2, *body*; 6:6, *dead body*, 11, *dead body*; 9:6-7, 10, *dead body*; 19:11, *dead body*, 13, *body*; and Haggai 2:13, *dead body*).
- Genesis 3 teaches that mankind's original immortality was conditional. Then when Adam and Eve failed their loyalty test, they were denied access to the Tree of Life in order to prevent them from becoming immortal sinners, thus resulting in death. Because sin starts in the mind, the whole person is guilty of sin. Therefore, death must involve the death of the whole person because the body, apart from the mind, cannot be guilty of sin and thus deserving of punishment.
- Neither of the words *immortal* or *immortality* are ever used in Scripture to describe a person or any aspect of human nature until the resurrection at the end of the age (I Corinthians 15:51-54). Instead, they are used only of God (I Timothy 6:16).
- In Paul's great resurrection chapter (specifically I Corinthians 15:44, 46), he describes the physical body in its pre-resurrection state by using a Greek word which literally means *soulish [natural]*, thus associating the soul with the physical aspect of human nature.
- The fact that the Bible uses sleep as a metaphor for death means that the whole person sleeps in death because the issue of consciousness and unconsciousness particularly applies to the mind of a person. Therefore, since the soul cannot be conscious when the body is dead; the whole person must be dead.

- The Biblical contrast between death as a sleep and the resurrection as an awakening strongly suggests that the whole person both sleeps and is later resurrected. Otherwise, the Bible would speak of the resurrection as the reuniting of the immortal soul with the new body, something it never does.
- Seven people, other than Jesus, are specifically said in Scripture to have been resurrected. Yet there is no record of any of these persons ever describing the glories of heaven, which is unbelievable if their souls had actually gone there before being reunited with their bodies.
- Paul's statement in I Corinthians 15:17-18 that without Christ's resurrection those believers who had died would simply have *perished* without hope proves that he did not teach an immortal soul doctrine. If believers had an immortal soul, then their deaths would not leave them in a perished and hopeless condition. At the very least, their immortal souls would realize their earlier hope by entering heaven and enjoying eternal bliss with God.
- All the Biblical statements that the dead do not think, have memory, or praise the Lord would be false statements if we possess an immortal soul because our souls would survive the body and do all those things.
- Paul's statement in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death would make Paul a liar if people had immortal souls. This is so because the definition of death by the advocates of an immortal soul is the separation of the body and soul. But if the soul survives the death of the body, then that is simply life in another state, not death (cf. John 3:16).
- The New Testament teaches that the Christian seeks the *literal* fulfillment of what he already possesses by *faith*. This *already...not yet* tension will not end until the resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus, when eternal life will be literally given to the believer (I Corinthians 15:51-55, and he will no longer be subject to death. If believers had an immortal soul, then death would constitute the immediate door to ending the tension instead of the Biblical teaching that it ends at the Second Coming of Jesus.
- Human experience teaches us that man is a holistic being because we know that the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of human nature interact with each other all the time. And because the doctrine of the immortal soul reflects a dualistic view in which body and soul are distinct and separate entities, with the soul even surviving the death of the body, it must be a false teaching.
- A non-material, immortal soul would not occupy space because everything which occupies space has at least some properties of matter. Because space and time are intertwined, a non-material soul would not occupy, or be affected by, time either. This means that such

a soul would be eternal, in turn meaning that the essence of every person is that he is God. But that is Satan's lie to Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5).

Why It Matters

It might be tempting to say that it does not really matter what happens when you die because we cannot know the answer with certainty until we first experience death for ourselves. But it always makes a difference whether or not we believe Satan's lies because he never tells one unless he intends to eventually use it in an attempt to deceive us. The following are some major reasons why it makes a difference what we believe about this topic:

- Belief in the immortality of the soul tends to undermine the importance of the Second Coming of Jesus because the alleged individual at-death entrance into glory weakens the significance of the Biblical corporate return of Jesus to restore all His physical creation and renew the earth itself.
- The dualism inherent in the belief of the immortality of the soul has historically tended to promote one of two different unbiblical extremes in conduct: (1) the denial of basic human comforts in an effort to punish the body and achieve a higher level of spiritual holiness of the soul (monastic and ascetic practices), or (2) the ignoring of Biblical health principles as unnecessary and inapplicable because the body is not viewed with the same importance as the soul.
- Satan and his demonic and human agencies will greatly increase their use of the supernatural in the end-time in order to deceive almost the whole world into following him (Matthew 24:24, Revelation 13:12-14; and 16:13-16). *Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light* (II Corinthians 11:14). As spirit beings, evil angels can also take on any appearance that they wish to. If we believe the lie that *you will not surely die* (Genesis 3:4), but that the essence of all dead people continues to live, then how will we react if a dead loved one (an evil angel impersonating as him/her) suddenly appears to teach us some supposed spiritual truth? Never underestimate the devil because he will overpower your senses if you do not rely on a *thus saith the Lord* for your understanding of truth.