

Is Man Immortal?

“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 soul.”

—Genesis 2:7

THE THEORY OF INHER-ent immortality alleges that when what we call death overtakes a human being, he actually becomes more alive than before it occurred. This theory is based on the supposition that somewhere within the human organism is an elusive, intangible, and invisible entity or intelligence called a “soul.” The claim of theologians is that this soul is immortal or “death proof.” Hence, when the body dies, this inner intelligence, or real man, escapes from its prison house of human limitations and is free to enjoy life forever on a much higher plane of existence, unless it has been a wicked soul. In the latter case, according to traditional theology, the soul must suffer untold agonies in a burning hell of literal fire and torment, or, at best, pass through a long period of suffering in purgatory before it can enjoy the freedom and blessings of heaven.

The expressions “immortal soul” and “undying soul” are so commonly used in religious conversation that their verity is taken for granted by most

who have not made an investigation as to their scriptural foundation. For this reason, it will be a distinct surprise to many to learn that these expressions are not found in the Bible at all. The traditional immortality of the human soul is purely a product of man's theories, and has no scriptural support whatsoever.

The word "soul" as used in the Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew word *nephesh*. Professor Strong's Bible concordance states that the word *nephesh* simply means "breathing creature," or, freely translated, that which is animated, or alive—a sentient being. The word is used in the Old Testament in connection with the lower animals as well as man. In Numbers 31:28, it is applied to such animals as "beeves," "asses," and "sheep." Thus, if we were to insist that the Hebrew word *nephesh*, translated "soul" in the Old Testament, means "immortal soul," then we would be bound to conclude that the lower animals also possess immortal souls—a conclusion that few would be willing to accept.

The word "soul" in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word *psuche*. We know that this word has exactly the same meaning as the Hebrew word *nephesh*, for the reason that the Apostle Peter uses it to translate the latter when he quotes from Psalm 16:10. The apostle's quotation is found in Acts 2:27, and reads, "Thou wilt not leave my soul [Greek, *psuche*; Hebrew, *nephesh*—sentient being] in hell [the grave, the condition of death], neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." Peter tells us that this is a prophecy concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus—that his soul was not left in death.

The word “soul,” and its plural, “souls,” are used in the Bible more than five hundred times, but in no instance is the thought even hinted that human souls are immortal. On the contrary, wherever the Bible discusses the subject of death in connection with the soul, it distinctly and clearly states that the soul, even as the body, is subject to death. For example, through the prophet, God said, “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” (Ezek. 18:4) In the New Testament, we read the words of Jesus, “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*Gehenna*—destruction].” (Matt. 10:28) Here, Jesus says that even those souls which go to the Bible hell are destroyed, not tormented.

In Matthew 26:38, Jesus is reported as saying, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” This is fully in harmony with the prophetic declaration concerning Jesus which says that his soul was made “an offering for sin.” (Isa. 53:10) Jesus’ soul died. Through that great sacrifice, the souls of all mankind are redeemed from death, and all, ultimately, will be resurrected from the condition of death.

Another interesting use of the Greek word *psuche*, or soul, in the New Testament is found in Acts 3:20-23. Here, we have a prophecy describing the work of restoration, or restitution, that will be carried on by the Messiah following his Second Coming and the establishment of his kingdom. We are told that then “every soul, which will not hear [obey] that prophet, shall be destroyed from among

the people.” Thus, both the Old and New Testaments emphasize the fact that human souls are mortal, subject to death, and that ultimately all wicked souls are to be destroyed in everlasting death—not preserved and tormented, as Dark Age creeds would have us believe.

FIRST HUMAN SOUL CREATED

Let us now review carefully the process by which the first human soul was brought into being, as this will help us to understand more clearly just what a soul really is. The scriptural account of this is given in our theme text at the beginning of this article. Note that the soul in this text of scripture is shown to be the result, or product, of a union of the body, or organism, with the breath of life—“man became a living soul.” This passage does not say, as many in the past have erroneously supposed, that God created man and then injected a soul into him. It declares, rather, that in the creation, man “became” a soul, which is quite different.

First, according to the record, the organism, or body, of man was “formed . . . of the dust of the ground.” This is scientifically in harmony with the facts as we know them today, as the body of man is composed entirely of the various chemical elements found in the earth. Then, into this organism, by the miraculous power of God, was imparted the “breath of life”—the animating power of the air which we breathe, and which is necessary to sustain life. The Hebrew word here translated “breath,” is *neshamah*, which, according to Professor Strong, literally means “breath.” The fact that it was breathed into the nostrils of Adam emphasizes the fact that

it was the breath. Certainly, the nostrils would be an unlikely place for an immortal soul to be located.

When the breath of life was blown into the nostrils of this first human organism, it became alive, or, as the text declares, "became a living soul." Thus seen, the soul is really that which results from the union of organism with the life-giving qualities of breath—the "breath of life." A simple illustration of this is the electric light. The bulb, with its internal vacuum, filament, etc., is not the light. Neither is the electricity that flows through the bulb the light, but the union of the bulb with the electricity produces the light. Destroy the bulb—corresponding to the organism—or cut off the electric current—corresponding to the breath of life—and the light goes out. That is, it ceases to exist, being extinguished.

It is the same with the human soul. When the body becomes impaired through disease or accident, to the point where it can no longer function sufficiently well to utilize the life-sustaining impulses of the breath of life, the soul, or life, of the individual "goes out"—it ceases to exist—it dies. Likewise, if for any reason, or in any manner, the breath of life is kept from the body, as in drowning, or asphyxiation, the life also ceases—the soul dies.

It should be borne in mind, in this connection, that the giving of life, the outward manifestations of which we are able to understand to some extent, is in the hands of the Creator. He is the source of all life on earth. It is not possible for man to form an organism, infuse it with some of the earth's atmosphere, and have it live. The literal air is

the breath of life both to humans and the lower animals, because it is the medium the Creator has used by which the life principle is communicated to all living things in the earth. This “life principle” comes only from the Creator—man cannot duplicate it. It is directly attributable to the almighty power of God, and is the only source by which human life exists.

As we pursue our investigation of this subject, we will discover that the Bible holds out a hope of future and eternal life for human beings, not because he originally put something into their organism which is immortal, but because he loves his human creation. The Creator proposes, through the resurrection, to again impart the life principle to mankind—to all who will obey his law.

THE HOPE OF IMMORTALITY

As already noted, the expression “immortal soul” is not found in the Bible at all. The word “immortal” is used only once in the entire Bible, and in that one instance it is applied to God and not to man. We quote, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.” (I Tim. 1:17) In I Timothy 6:16, we have a passage similar to the foregoing in which the word “immortality” is used. This text is also speaking of God, and reads, “Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting.” These two scriptural passages should definitely settle the question as to whether man, by nature, is an immortal creature.

The word “immortality” is used four other times in the Bible, and in each case it is descriptive of a future conditional reward for those who in this life walk faithfully in the footsteps of the Master. Here let us emphasize the fact, once again, that we are not attempting to prove that there is no future life for human beings. Rather, all hope of future life, according to the Bible, is based on the fact that there is to be a resurrection of the dead, not on the supposition that man is by nature immortal, and hence cannot die.

We will consider the four scriptures which refer to those whose hope is to be exalted to immortality with the Lord. Romans 2:7 reads, “To them [those in Christ] who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.” This text shows that immortality is not now a possession of those in Christ, but rather that it is something to be sought after, through “patient continuance in well doing.”

In I Corinthians 15:53, we read, “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” Here we are told that immortality is a quality, which, if it is ever to be possessed, must be “put on.” Clearly the Apostle says that now we are “mortal” beings. The next verse reads, “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory.”

There is one other text in the Bible in which the word “immortality” appears, and that is II Timothy 1:10. It reads as follows, “But is now made manifest

by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” It is evident from this passage that no one prior to our Lord’s First Advent had even as much as an opportunity to strive for immortality, as the followers of Christ during this Gospel Age are encouraged to do. It shows, furthermore, that all hope of life and immortality is centered in Jesus and in his redemptive work.

WHAT IS DEATH?

Death is man’s greatest enemy. The Bible alone, of all the sources of information available to man, furnishes us with definite information concerning the future of those who are struck down by this dread enemy. God’s Word promises that a time is coming when there “shall be no more death,” and, furthermore, that those who have died shall live again. (Rev. 21:4; John 5:28) A knowledge of the Creator’s provision for a dying race should give real solace to those who mourn for their loved ones who have died.

Added to the awful specter of death itself, is the admitted uncertainty of most as to what lies beyond the grave. What happens to an individual the next moment after death occurs? Is that individual still alive in some mysterious way, actually hovering around the funeral home while his friends are gathered to mourn his passing? Has he departed to some unknown and beautiful place of eternal bliss? In the event that the deceased was not a Christian, is he now in the traditional regions of the cursed, where he is doomed to suffer

an eternity of torture in a hell of fire and brimstone?

Try as we will, we cannot dismiss these questions from our minds. Many may partially console themselves in the thought that at least many of their close friends and relatives who have died were of good character, faithful believers in Christianity as they understood it, and hence, according to their accepted beliefs, should now be happy in heaven. Yet, many have also had some dear friends, and probably relatives, who have died outside the sphere of orthodox belief and practice, and they cannot help wondering what has become of these. Are they now suffering, or are they happy?

SCIENCE HOLDS NO HOPE

Science tells us that there is no evidence of the continuance of human life after death occurs, so that as far as the life principle is concerned, man is no different than the lower animals. Thus, we conclude that the higher intelligence of the human species is not due to the traditional theory that man has hidden within him a separate intelligence called a "soul," or a "spirit," but to the fact that he was created a superior, a more refined organism than the animal creation, yet mortal.

Let us now note a few of the scriptural passages which show clearly that science is correct as far as the present condition of the dead is concerned. Ecclesiastes 9:5 reads, "The living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing." Psalm 49:10-12 is also to the point, reading, "He seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others.

Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish.”

After the transgression of our first parents, God said, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” (Gen. 3:19) David makes an emphatic declaration as to the condition of those who return to the dust. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.” (Ps. 146:4) There is no mistaking the fact that these words describe a dead person as being absolutely unconscious, even his thoughts having perished.

Note again the statement of the psalmist, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth.” If a human being, as a conscious, living soul, was brought into existence by the union of the material body with the breath of life, as we have already shown by the Scriptures to be the case, it would seem reasonable that when these two elements are separated, life would cease. This is exactly what the text states, “In that very day his thoughts perish.”

Some may wonder about the “breath of life,” thinking perhaps this may be describing that traditional, mysterious part of our being that continues to live on after the body dies. Let us now examine a passage which describes the moment of death, showing exactly what becomes of the two principal elements which divine, creative wisdom has combined to produce human life. It reads, “Then shall the dust [body] return to the earth as it was: and

the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”—Eccles. 12:7

The key to a proper understanding of this text is found in the word “return,” used with respect to both the body and the spirit. The body is said to return to the earth. This is because its elements originally came from the earth. It follows, therefore, that if the spirit returns to God, it must have been with God before it entered the human organism. If to be with God in this sense means to be in heaven, then it follows that if the “spirit” here referred to is a conscious entity, capable of enjoying life in a spiritual heaven, it means that every one of mankind must have been in that spiritual heaven before they were born, else it could not be said that they “return” there when they die.

WHAT THE “SPIRIT” REALLY IS

The Hebrew word here translated “spirit,” is *ruwach*. Professor Strong tells us that this Hebrew word *ruwach* means “wind,” or “breath.” It is the same Hebrew word that is translated “breath” in Genesis 7:15, where it is said to be possessed by the lower animals. We quote, “They went in unto Noah into the ark, two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath [*ruwach*] of life.” If the use of the word *ruwach* to describe the breath or spirit of life in human beings means that we have within us an intelligent entity of some sort that continues to live after the body dies, it also means that the lower animals inherently possess a similar intangible entity which can never die.

However, when we reason in harmony with the Word of God, all is clear. Genesis 2:7 declares that

God created man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The result of the uniting of the body with the breath of life is said to be that man became a living soul. Clearly, when the body returns to the earth, and the breath or spirit of life returns to its original source—to God who gave it—it leaves the individual in exactly the same condition as he was before birth—a condition of non-existence.

To settle this question even more definitely, we turn to Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, where the Hebrew word *ruwach* is again used. There it is said that the breath (*ruwach*) of both man and beast goes to the same place at death. “That which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath [*ruwach*]; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward [to heaven], and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?”

The records of the New Testament on the subject of death agree fully with those of the Old Testament. Jesus indicated that the dead are in a condition of unconsciousness, which he likened to sleep. In John 11:11,14-46, we have a wonderfully revealing account of the sickness, death, and awakening of Lazarus, a dear friend of Jesus. Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, were also friends of the Master, and when their brother was taken sick they sent word to Jesus supposing that he would come at once to their aid.

However, instead of going immediately to the bedside of his friend, Lazarus, Jesus tarried. After some time had elapsed, he said to his disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." The disciples misunderstood this, supposing that Jesus referred to natural sleep. Then he said plainly, "Lazarus is dead." Later, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus addressed this dead one in a loud voice saying, "Lazarus, come forth." We are then told that "he that was dead came forth." There is not a hint here that Lazarus' "soul" was either in a heaven of bliss or a hell of torment. According to the record, he was asleep in death. This was the belief and teaching of Jesus.

In this account of the awakening of Lazarus from the sleep of death, we have emphasized the fact that the scriptural hope for life beyond the grave is in the assurance that there is to be a resurrection of the dead, rather than in the supposition that man possesses inherent immortality. The Apostle Paul fully agrees with this. In I Corinthians 15:12-18, he concludes that if there be no resurrection of the dead, "Then they . . . which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished."

In the book of Revelation also, we find the same uniformity of thought as to the unconscious condition of the dead. For example, the revelator says, "The sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [the grave] delivered up the dead which were in them." (Rev. 20:13) Note the fact that according to the text just quoted, those that are in the scriptural "hell" [grave] are declared to be dead. This means that they are not alive somewhere and being tormented. This text also reveals

that the hope of the dead is that they shall be brought out of hell [grave], and raised to life.

In brief then, the answer to the query, “Where are the dead?” is that they are now in a state of unconsciousness and non-existence. Further, all hope for life beyond the grave is centered in the scriptural assurance that, through the mighty power of the great Creator exercised by the divine Christ during the coming kingdom period, there is to be a “resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:15) Thus understood, the clear evidence of the Scriptures answers the question posed in our title in this way: No, man is not immortal! ■