

Immortality and the Human Soul

***“The LORD God formed man out of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”
—Genesis 2:7***

TRADITION HOLDS THAT man possesses an immortal soul which can and does live apart from the human body, in which it resides until the body dies. According to this tradition, when the body dies, the soul continues to live. Being immortal, it is believed, the soul cannot die, so it exists eternally, either in a state of happiness or of suffering, depending on how well it managed the human body in which it once resided.

Strictly from a scientific viewpoint, no trace of this claimed separate entity has ever been discovered in the human body. With all the powerful technology and knowledge of our day, no such part of the human organism has ever been revealed. Some have gone so far as to record the weight of a human body just before and immediately after death, but with no evidence that a soul weighing even as little as one ounce had left the formerly living person.

To overcome the objection that a separate entity, living and vigorous, has never been found in a human body, a church leader once described the human soul as being “without interior or exterior, without body, shape, or parts, and so small that a million of them could be put into a nutshell, and yet there would be room for more.” As is often true with respect to traditions, some will go to extreme lengths in order to prove their validity. However, we are not particularly interested in traditions, whether they be that of the immortal soul, or others, except to discover the extent to which they may be in harmony with, or contrary to, the inspired Word of God. It is the testimony of the Scriptures alone which should guide the understanding of the sincere, truth-seeking worshiper of God.

It is generally supposed that the Bible teaches that man possesses an immortal soul. However, the Bible makes no mention at all of an immortal soul. The expression, “immortal soul,” or any equivalent thereof, does not appear anywhere in the Bible. The *King James Version* does not contain it, nor do any of the many modern translations which are available.

This, of course, is a negative approach to the subject. It is more important to discover what the Bible does teach concerning the human soul. In that regard, we believe that a good place to start is with the text which appears at the beginning of this article. This is a very important verse, for in it we are informed as to how God created the first human soul, and of exactly what it consists. While today’s technology has failed to detect the traditional “immortal soul,” the soul described by God’s Word is quite visible.

In our text we are told that man “became a living soul.” The body was formed from the elements of the earth, but it had no life—it was not a soul. God breathed into this body the breath of life, but the breath of life was not the soul either. The body was lifeless until animated by the breath of life. The brain could not think; the eyes could not see; the ears could not hear; the tongue could not speak or taste; the nose could not smell, nor could the skin feel. However, all the organs of that perfectly created body at once became alive when God breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life. Man “became” a living soul, our text says. From this explanation which the Bible furnishes, we learn that man does not “possess” a soul, but that he “is” a soul. Appropriately, the Hebrew word translated “soul” in our text is defined as “breathing creature,” or “living being.”

The “breath of life” which animates the human organism is no different than the breath of life given to the lower animals. Referring to the animals which perished in the Flood, we read, “All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.” (Gen. 7:21-23) We are further informed concerning man and beast that they “have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast.” —Eccles. 3:19,20

Since the word soul simply means living being, we find that the Bible quite properly refers to the lower animals as souls. Numbers 31:28 reads, “Levy a tribute unto the LORD of the men of war which went out to battle: one soul of five hundred, both of the persons, and of the beeves, and of the asses, and of the sheep.” From this we see that we could just as properly speak of “sheep souls” as of human souls,

because they are both living beings. Also, in Genesis 1:20, concerning the creation of the lower animals, we find the expression, “the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly.” The word “life” in this verse is translated from the same Hebrew word as “soul” in our opening text. Thus, the Bible shows that the lower creatures are souls, and that the words “life” and “soul” are synonymous.

A sheep soul, for example, is not inferior to a human soul because it is animated by a different breath of life, for as we have just considered, such is not the case. The difference is in the construction of the organism, particularly in the formation of the brain. In some respects the organisms of certain lower animals are superior to that of mankind. A dog, for example, has a much keener sense of smell and hearing. An eagle’s eyesight is far superior to man’s. Other animals possess specific senses which are stronger than that of humans.

God in his great wisdom, and by his unlimited power, “created man in his own image.” (Gen. 1:27) This was in the sense that he gave him the ability to reason, and to have a moral sense of right from wrong. Although his creation of all the lower animals was perfect and complete, no mention is made that they were created in God’s image. It is only as we understand man’s creation as having been in God’s “own image,” that we are able to know why the human brain can function on such a preeminently higher plane.

Since man can thus reason, he possesses what we call a conscience. That is, he has a consciousness, or mental awareness, of what is right and wrong. To the extent that this element of God’s

image has been retained in individual members of the fallen race, a person will feel more or less ill at ease when he does wrong, but have inner peace when he has endeavored to live up to that which he knows to be right. The Scriptures speak of the human conscience in this way, the Apostle Paul testifying that mankind's "consciences testify, and their thoughts will either accuse or excuse them."—Rom. 2:15, *International Standard Version*

SOULS DIE

When God said to Adam, "Thou shalt surely die," if he disobeyed, he meant that as a living soul Adam would cease to exist. (Gen. 2:17) The matter is even more clearly stated in Ezekiel 18:4, where God says, "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." Here we see a simple, but all-important, truth of the Bible. A person—living being, soul—who sins shall die.

As we look back upon man's history, and consider the Bible's testimony, we correctly discern that all are born in sin, and that as a result the entire human race is dying. (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 3:23; 5:12) In his great love, however, God has provided redemption from death for all sinful souls, or persons. This is through the gift of his beloved Son, Christ Jesus, who died that the dead world might have an opportunity to live. (Rom. 5:18-21) Concerning Jesus' sacrificial death on behalf of the sin-cursed and dying race, the Prophet Isaiah wrote that his "soul" was made an offering for sin, and also that he "poured out his soul unto death."—Isa. 53:10,12

It was the living soul Adam that was condemned to death, and all his descendants as living souls lost life through him, because all inherited sin and imperfection. Paul wrote, "By man came death," and "in Adam all die." Then he added, "by man came also the resurrection of the dead," and stated that those who come into union with Christ "shall all be made alive. ... Every man in his own order."—I Cor. 15:21-23

John 3:16 reads, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Adam and all past generations of his progeny have fallen asleep in death, but they have not "perished" eternally. Through the redemptive work of Christ Jesus, and by the exercise of divine power, they are to be awakened in the resurrection and given an opportunity to believe, and upon the basis of their belief and obedience, to live forever.

Some are given this opportunity in the present life. These are the ones who are called to discipleship. Accepting Jesus as their Redeemer and responding to the invitation to take up their cross and follow him, they gladly lay down their lives with him, being "planted together in the likeness of his death." (Matt. 16:24; Rom. 6:3-6) These are referred to in Revelation 20:4 as the "souls" which are "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God," but which will be resurrected from death to live and reign with Christ a thousand years.

In connection with those who die "in Christ," and emphasizing the importance of the resurrection, Paul wrote, "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which

are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.” (I Cor. 15:17,18) Because there is to be a resurrection of the dead, Paul speaks of the faithful followers of Christ who die as merely being asleep. If there were to be no resurrection of the dead, then even those who faithfully lay down their lives in serving the Lord would perish, never to be awakened from the sleep of death.

Jesus emphasizes this same important truth in an admonition to his disciples to meet courageously any and all opposition that might be pitted against them, even though they might be persecuted unto death. He said, “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 [Greek: *Gehenna*, meaning everlasting destruction].” —Matt. 10:28

This does not imply that the soul can live apart from the body, for actually the body, combined with the breath of life, is the soul. Rather, Jesus is speaking from the standpoint of God’s plan to awaken the dead in the resurrection. It was from this standpoint that Paul could say that faithful Christians who fell asleep in death had not perished. If an enemy puts a Christian to death, he has not forever perished as a soul. Although the body goes back to the dust from which it was created, ceasing to exist, the “soul,” that which was the identity of the living person from God’s viewpoint, merely “sleeps” in death until the resurrection, when, by divine power, it shall be raised with a new body. —I Cor. 15:38

Jesus explained this from another standpoint, as recorded in Luke 20:37,38. “Now that the dead are

raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.” Jesus did not say that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had gone to heaven to live with God. He simply explained that because there is to be a resurrection of the dead, and these faithful servants will be restored to life, God does not consider them as having eternally gone out of existence. They “live unto him” in the sense that God knows they will be raised from the dead.

So it is with all God’s faithful servants of the past. They may have been put to death by their enemies; they may have been thrown to the lions, or beheaded, or burned at the stake. However, to God they still “live” in his future plans and purposes. They have not perished, for he will use his unlimited power to restore them from the sleep of death.

The “souls” which are “beheaded,” previously mentioned in Revelation 20:4, are brought forth in the “first resurrection” to live and reign with Christ a thousand years. (vs. 6) The “souls” that died serving God during the ages preceding Jesus’ First Advent will come forth to a “better resurrection,” to serve as “princes in all the earth.”—Heb. 11:35; Ps. 45:16

THE HOPE OF IMMORTALITY

As we have already noted, the expression “immortal soul” is not found anywhere in the Bible. The word “immortal” appears only once in Scripture, and in that one instance it is applied to God, and not to man. The text reads, “Now unto the King

eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.” (I Tim. 1:17) In this same letter to Timothy, Paul wrote concerning God, “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.”—I Tim. 6:16

These two texts of Scripture prove beyond doubt that man does not possess immortality. They reveal that immortality is a quality of the divine nature. God, the Creator, alone possesses inherent immortality, “life in himself.” When Jesus was raised from the dead, God gave “to the Son to have life in himself.” (John 5:26) The Heavenly Father gave Jesus immortality as a reward for his faithfulness in laying down his humanity, his perfect human life, for the sins of the world.—John 1:29; I John 2:2

Now the hope of attaining immortality is held out in the Scriptures to all those who follow faithfully in the footsteps of Jesus, laying down their lives in sacrifice even as Jesus did. It is in this connection, and with reference to Jesus’ true disciples, that Paul wrote: “To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality.” (Rom. 2:7) We would not “seek for” immortality if we already possessed it.

The Christian’s hope of immortality will find fruition in the resurrection. Writing concerning this Paul said, “This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” (I Cor. 15:53) We note here that immortality is a quality which, by divine power, must be “put on” in the resurrection. It is not an inherent quality of humans, or human souls.

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.” (vs. 54) Notice how clearly the apostle states in both of the foregoing verses that Christians are now mortal, not immortal.

It is also interesting and revealing to notice Paul’s reasoning in connection with his use of the expressions “shall have put on” and “then shall be brought to pass” in verse 54. Taking his position after the true disciples of Christ have been raised from the dead and exalted to immortality, he explains that when this takes place, then the saying will be fulfilled, “Death is swallowed up in victory.”—vs. 54

The saying that “death is swallowed up in victory,” which Paul explains will come to pass after the disciples of Christ are brought forth in the resurrection and exalted to immortality, is found in Isaiah 25:6-9. This is a prophecy of the kingdom of Christ and the blessings it will bring to the people of all nations. In this kingdom, the followers of Jesus who previously were proven worthy of the “first resurrection,” will reign with Christ. In Isaiah’s prophecy, this future kingdom is symbolized by a “mountain,” in which the Lord will “make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined.”

In this kingdom, the prophet continues, God will also destroy “the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the

rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Here is a marvelous prophecy assuring us that through the administration of Christ's kingdom, death, with all its attendant evils, will be destroyed. As Paul explains, this glorious work of the kingdom follows the resurrection and exaltation of the followers of Jesus to glory, honor, and immortality. It is in this exalted position that they will reign with Christ for the purpose of sharing with him in the dispensing of health and life on earth to the millions of mankind who have died, and are dying, as a result of Adam's sin.

The Apostle Peter refers to this period in the plan of salvation when the work of restoring mankind to life is to be accomplished. He speaks of it as “the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:20,21) Just as the Apostle Peter declares, all the Old Testament prophets, speaking as the mouthpieces of God, foretold this coming time of blessing, when, through Christ, all will be given an opportunity to believe, to obey the laws of the kingdom, and live forever.

However, the apostle continues by pointing out that this will not mean universal salvation. All will be released from the original condemnation which came upon the race through Adam. After that, however, each individual will need to prove his worthiness of everlasting life. During this restitution period,

Peter speaks of Christ as a “prophet,” like unto Moses. “Him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you, And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.”—vss. 22,23

We note that Peter, in speaking of those who are enlightened by “that prophet,” refers to them as souls, and “every soul” that does not obey after being taught principles of righteousness “shall be destroyed.” This agrees with Ezekiel 18:4 which declares, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” In these texts, as throughout the entire Bible, the word “soul” applies to the entire being. It is not a separate entity which dwells within the human body, but somehow continues to live when the body dies.

Hence, as we have seen, the Bible speaks concerning the hope of immortality as a reward for faithfulness in Christian discipleship, but nowhere does it make mention of the traditional “immortal soul.” As to the origin of this tradition, some scholars have suggested that it started with the ancient Babylonians. Others feel it originated with the Greeks. Regardless of who among mankind began promoting this teaching, however, its real roots lie in the infamous lie that Satan spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden, “Ye shall not surely die.”—Gen. 3:4

Speaking through the serpent, Satan, while not using the term “immortal soul,” in reality told Eve that the penalty God said would come upon her and Adam if they disobeyed—that penalty being death—was not true. Satan said that if they ate of the forbidden fruit, rather than dying, their eyes would be opened, and they would be able to discern good and evil. (vs. 5) Indeed, when our first parents

disobeyed God, their eyes were opened—opened to discern the great sin which they had just committed. They also soon realized that Satan lied when he said “Ye shall not surely die,” and understood in no uncertain terms that neither they, nor their progeny, were immortal. They died, as did their children, and all of the billions of their offspring since.

We rejoice that all things out of harmony with God, including misleading human traditions, are to soon be done away with. This will be accomplished by the reign of Christ, at the conclusion of which, God’s will shall be done in earth even as it is in heaven. (Matt. 6:10) Satan, the author and proponent of these erroneous and confusing traditions will also be destroyed. Then the true knowledge of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea.—Isa. 11:9 ■

OBITUARIES

The following brethren have recently finished their Christian course. We wish to express our sincere sympathy to their family and friends in the loss of these dear ones.