

Of LIFE, DEATH and IMMORTALITY

We talk and think in terms of “*being*.” The most frequently used words in our language are the various forms of the verb “to be”—am, are, was, were, shall be, will have been, and so on.

But did you ever stop to analyze “being”? Being is existence, existence is life, and life is yours and mine. But what is its nature? You and I are mortal and corruptible. But many people believe there is something about us—personality or soul or spirit. In some mysterious way we are immortal, undying, indestructible, perpetual, a part of eternity itself.

An appealing doctrine, almost universally believed. But is it true? Belief in immortality is as old as the human race. It grew out of man’s primary emotion: fear. Fear of want, of necessity, of pain, but above all, of death. Unable to resign himself to the idea of annihilation, early man conceived of every living thing as having a soul, or secret life which could be separated from the body in illness, sleep or death. He could not resign himself to the idea of annihilation.

Primitive life was beset with a thousand dangers, and seldom ended with natural death. Long before old age could come, violence or disease claimed almost everyone. For this reason, primitive persons did not think of death as ever natural. If violence and disease could be prevented, they rationalized, one could live on forever.

Modern religion has widely accepted this concept of the nature of humankind. As the poet Longfellow describes it:

*Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers
And things are not what they seem.
Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.*

Modern religion connects the so-called Fall of man with the beginning of natural death—an erroneous concept nowhere taught in Scripture. Natural death, they say, was the penalty for sin. If Adam had not sinned, he would not have died even a natural death. They fail to recognize that death was in existence long before the time of Adam. (For a complete discussion of this topic, see section in this series on “Original Sin.”)

What says the Bible? Shall we stake our faith on human reasoning, or shall we take our question to the God who created us and let Him answer through His written Word?

This is a subject vital to each of us. All of us have only one life, and when it is spent, what then? Only from our Creator can we obtain true and accurate knowledge of this important topic.

LIFE...

OUR PHYSICAL NATURE

Each of us is a living organism, a member of the human race, a human being. We are not creatures of chance evolution but products of God’s special creation. Throughout His Word, God makes it plain that He is the source of all life on this planet. “*I have made the earth, and created man on it*” (Isa. 45:12). In the Bible, the term man is used collectively of both male and female, i.e., all mankind. “*But from the*

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beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female' (Mark 10:6).

God is *"the fountain of life," "the fountain of living waters"* (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13). Paul told the Athenians that it was *"God, who made the world and everything in it,"* and that He *"gives to all life, breath, and all things"* (Acts 17:24-25). The patriarch Job testified that *"The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life"* (Job 33:4). It is God who *"spread forth the earth... , who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it "* (Isa. 42:5 NKJV).

As living beings, we are distinguished from other mammals by our intellect, our powers of reason and comprehension, and our ability to remember. Without knowledge, we have *"no advantage over animals"* (Eccl. 3:19). But we have the capacity for learning; we can rise above the level of the beast. *"Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD"* (Ps. 34:11) is the invitation of the Almighty. Jesus said: *"Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me;...everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me"* (Matt. 11:29; John 6:45). Peter testified that *"all things that pertain to life and godliness" come "through the knowledge of Him"* (2 Pet. 1:2-3).

We Are Mortal

Mortality means the condition of being mortal or subject to death. It is the opposite of immortality. The word *mortal* is also used of a *human being*, as in 1 Cor. 15:53: *"This mortal must put on immortality."*

The whole human race is mortal, perishable. This fact is stated in the Bible in a great variety of ways. For example, it is aptly described by the prophet Isaiah: *"All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field"* (40:6). Also in the Book of Job: *"Can a mortal be more righteous than God?"* (4:17).

Life Is Short

To the Christian, this mortal life is so brief as to be counted not really living at all. It is but the preparation for that life which will endure forever. This life is good, but its one fault is its brevity. We often say this life would be good enough—if it would last. But it does not last, it is soon over.

The Scriptures picture the brief, fragile, perishable nature of life in many different ways.

A shadow. King David described it this way: *"Our days on the earth are as a shadow"* (1 Chron 29:15). Again in Ps. 102:11, he compared life to a *"shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass."* Psalm 144:4 contains a similar illustration: *"Man is like a breath; His days are like a passing shadow."*

Of few days. To Job, man *"who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; He flees like a shadow and does not continue"* (14:1-2).

As a vapor, a mist. The writer of the book of James asked: *"For what is your life?"* Then he answered his question: *"It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away"* (4:14). The New English Bible renders it: *"You are no more than a mist, seen for a little while and then dispersing."*

As hurrying years. We are not promised any definite number of years, but the average life-span today is not far from the Psalmist's prediction of *"threescore years and ten."* And while the life of a few continues 80 or 90 or even more years, it is as the Psalmist states: *"The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; For it is soon cut off, and we fly away "* (Ps. 90:10).

Insignificant. As seen by the eye of the Almighty, our life on earth is counted for naught unless it is used in His service. To God, *"All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless"* (Isa. 40:17). Nations also are described as *"a drop of a bucket,"* and as the *"the small dust of the balance."* The inhabitants are referred to as *"grasshoppers,"* and as *"you worm Jacob, you men of Israel"* (Isa. 40:15, 22; 41:14).

Our natural state is so insignificant as to be compared to that of *"the beasts that perish Like sheep they are laid in the grave"* (Ps. 49:12, 14). Our life is so short that our joy, if not in the Lord, is *"but for a*

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moment” and “*Though his haughtiness mounts up to the heavens, and his head reaches to the clouds, yet he will perish forever*” (Job 20:5-7).

All these texts describe the *mortality of man*, proving beyond question that *immortality is not inherent*.

When We Die ... ?

The Bible teaches that *man in death knows nothing*. Death is the end of life, and the cessation of all the life processes. The Bible is explicit on the subject.

The State of the Dead

The Bible teaches that the dead sleep in the grave, that *from the moment of death, man knows nothing*. Said the Psalmist speaking of man, “*He breathes his last breath, he returns to the dust; and in that same hour all his thinking ends*” (Ps. 146:4 NEB). Solomon agreed: “*For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun*” (Eccl. 9:5-6). When man goes to the grave, he no longer loves or hates; his mental processes are stilled. He knows nothing that goes on in this world or any other.

This point is made clear in the words of Huldah the prophetess to King Josiah. Evil was prophesied upon the nation because they had forsaken the true God and worshiped idols. But the prophetess’ words to the king were, speaking for God: “*and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; and your eyes shall not see all the calamity which I will bring on this place*” (2 Kings 22:20). The evil would be brought upon Judah according to the prophecy, but King Josiah would know nothing about it in death because “*the dead know not anything.*”

Death Is a “Sleep”

The dead sleep in the grave. Death is often represented in the Bible as a “sleep.” It is recorded that many of the kings, both good and bad, “slept” with their fathers. Jesus said of Lazarus, he “sleeps.” Paul spoke of those that “sleep” in Jesus who will be raised to life at Christ’s second coming. Death is a deep sleep; the person sleeping knows nothing and a person asleep in death likewise knows nothing.

That the dead sleep in the grave was understood by the prophets. *Job* looked forward to waiting in the grave: “*If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness*” (17:13). *Isaiah* also agreed that death was a sleep. He prophesied of a time when the dead would live, when “*Your dead shall live; Together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; For your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead*” (Isa. 26:19). *Daniel* likewise spoke of the sleeping servants who would awake: “*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake*” (Dan. 12:2).

What Is the Soul?

It is commonly accepted that the soul is a separate entity from the body and that at death it wings its way to heaven to the throne of God. While this may be a comforting thought, *it is not Scriptural*.

The word translated “soul” or “spirit” appears 1686 times in the Bible, and *not once is it described as undying, immortal, deathless, or in any way everlasting*. The Douay Version is especially explicit: “*The son of man is not immortal*” (Ecclesiastics 17:29).

What is a “soul”? Man does not *possess* a soul, he *is* a soul. According to *Genesis’s Hebrew Lexicon*, the Hebrew word *Nephish*, translated “soul,” has for its definition “a living creature; a person; sometimes applied to animals; life; beast; body; breath; creature; man; mind; one; own; person.” Examples of its use in Scripture are numerous.

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The soul is the whole living person. “*Seventy souls*” went down with Jacob into Egypt (Ex. 1:5); “*eight souls*” were saved in Noah’s day (1 Pet. 3:20); Paul was among 276 “souls” who survived the shipwreck in a storm.

Souls Die

“*The soul that sins, it shall die.*” These words of Ezekiel prove beyond doubt that *souls die*. The thought that the soul survived the body was contrary to the Israelite understanding and is not to be found in the Old Testament. The *whole man* dies when his breath returns to God who gave it. Speaking of those who disobeyed and were destroyed by God’s hand, the Psalmist uses “soul” and “life” interchangeably, saying “*He [God] did not spare their soul from death, but gave their life over to the plague*” (Ps. 78:50). Their *soul* was their *life*. They lost their lives to the plague.

Peter, addressing the assembly, spoke of *souls being destroyed*. “*And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people*” (Acts 3:23). The idea that souls are immortal and undying is a product of Greek thought and cannot be supported by the Scriptures.

“*The spirit shall return to God who gave it*”—what spirit?

The spirit that returns to God who gave it is nothing more or less than the breath. The Hebrew word most often translated “spirit” is *ruach*. Some of its definitions from the Lexicon are: “To breathe, to blow, especially with the nostrils, to smell (as is done by drawing the air in and out through the nostrils). Spirit, breath—breathe of the mouth... to breathe, breath of air... breath, life, the vital principle, which shows itself in the breathing of the mouth and nostrils.” To show the use of the word in context, the Lexicon refers to Eccl. 12:7: “*The spirit will return to God who gave it.*”

At death the breath returns to the Giver; it passes out into the great reservoir of atmosphere which surrounds our earth and vivifies both man and beast. “*The breath of the Almighty gives me life.*” said Job, and “*If He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust*” (Job 33:4; 34:14-15). When a man dies, “*His spirit departs, he returns to his earth*” (Ps. 146:4). A man is alive, as Job tells us, “*As long as my breath is in me, and the breath of God in my nostrils*” (Job 27:3; note the marginal reference on “spirit” reads, “the breath which God gave him”).

In his Epistle James compares the lifeless body to faith without works. “*For as the body without the spirit (breath, margin) is dead, so faith without works is dead also*” (Jas. 2:26). This text is rendered by the New English translation: “*As the body is dead when there is no breath left in it...*” showing plainly that breath and spirit are one and the same.

What about...?

There are verses in the Bible which on surface reading might support the view that the soul or spirit survives the body at death. For example,

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

This text in no way supports the belief that there is any consciousness after death. At death, the body is placed in the grave and in time returns to dust. The spirit, or breath of life, returns to the Giver, rejoining the atmosphere that supplies life to all creatures that breathe on this earth. Everything that lives depends upon God for the breath of life. (If the popular religious idea were true, that Eccl. 12:7 teaches that the ‘immortal soul’ goes to God, then every human being that breathes must, one and all—without exception—go to heaven!)

“*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*” (Matt. 10:28).

Jesus was here delivering a discourse to the twelve apostles. What He was saying in effect was that

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they need not fear those who could take away their temporal life, but fear God who alone can destroy eternally. They might meet martyrdom as did Stephen, but that was not to be feared; only God's judgments need be feared. The rendering of this text in *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott* is clearer: "*Be not afraid of those who kill the body, but cannot destroy the future life; but rather fear him who can utterly destroy both Life and Body in Gehenna.*"

"*And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43)?

Jesus could not possibly have promised to meet the thief in heaven "that day" because He testified later to Mary after the resurrection: "*Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father*" (John 20:17). Jesus was placed in the tomb that day (Luke 23:53), and from the time of His death until the resurrection, He "slept" in death. Of Himself He said, "*I am He who lives, and was dead*" (Rev. 1:18) and "*the dead know nothing*" (Eccl. 9:5). Furthermore, salvation is not promised to evildoers such as thieves.

Some authorities doubt the authenticity of Luke 23:43, reporting it to have been left out of the best early manuscripts. We are confident Jesus did not make such a statement to the thief. (For further explanation, see our booklet *What Must We Do To Be Saved?*)

"*Simon Peter said to Him, 'Lord, where are You going?' Jesus answered him, 'Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward'*" (John 13:36).

Jesus spoke these words to His disciples following the Last Supper. He did not mean that Peter (who asked the question) or we or anyone else would follow Him to heaven at death. Jesus was speaking by Divine foreknowledge of His impending death. Peter vowed he would follow his Master even to the point of giving his life, but Jesus knew he was not yet ready to fully follow Him. Afterward, sometime in the future, Peter *would* follow Jesus in death, but only to the grave, not to heaven.

"*So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord. Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him*" (2 Cor. 5:6-9).

By stating that while at home in the body he was absent from the Lord, Paul did not infer that at death his soul or spirit would go at once to be with the Lord. This belief is not Scriptural. Paul is saying that being as long as we are in this mortal state (at home in the body) we are "*absent from the Lord,*" mortal, subject to persecution, tribulation and trial. For this reason, to be "*present with the Lord*" and "*absent from the body*" of mortality is more desirable—it means we have been made immortal!

This is the thought of the preceding verses as well. In them the Apostle had spoken of his earnest desire to be freed from mortality and to be clothed with immortality. He did not expect to receive it at death but at some future day, as he wrote to Timothy: "*Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day*" (2 Tim. 4:8)—the Day of Judgment when all shall receive their rewards (2 Cor. 5:10).

Knowing that he could not possibly live to see the return of Christ, Paul preferred to die, to be absent from the body of mortality, for his next conscious moment would be the resurrection when he would be "*present with the Lord.*"

"*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain... For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you*" (Phil. 1:21-24).

Here again Paul was not teaching that he expected to be with Christ and get his reward immediately after death. To hope to depart and be with Christ *at death* would contradict Paul's own teaching concerning resurrection and reward.

The Greek word *analuō*, translated "depart" in v. 23 is rendered "return" in Luke 12:36 where Jesus is obviously speaking of His return to reward the faithful. Paul was simply longing for the return of Jesus.

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He had experienced much hardship and persecution in his ministry. To sleep in death would be preferable to more suffering. Since there is no awareness of time in death, his next waking moment would be with Christ.

"...may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23).

This verse is often used to depict man as having a "triune nature," three parts in one. But to describe man thus is contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures. The Apostle is praying that his readers' spirit and soul and body may be kept sound and blameless. The spirit has been described as the "innermost functioning reality of the personal life." The Greek idea was that soul and body constitute the living person known. Paul's prayer was essentially that these disciples may be preserved 'intact' in the whole of their personal life; and that they may be so preserved until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he was praying that they be sound mentally, physically and spiritually.

LIFE BEYOND DEATH? YES...

According to one secular source (The Encyclopedia Americana), the "resurrection" is "generally spoken of as the resurrection of the dead, or of the body,...the doctrine of the reunion of the soul and body of man after their separation in death." This states the general belief held by a major portion of the nominal churches of today.

However, this has been adopted from sources *other* than the Scriptures. Some idea of life after death has appeared in most cultures, from the most primitive to the most highly developed. The type of future existence varies all the way from survival of spirits, reincarnation and transmigration of souls, to a physical resurrection of the body.

In many primitive religions, the concept of survival goes no further than the idea of the hovering of departed spirits above the familiar scenes of their earthly life. In early Egyptian religion, the belief in survival was combined with an elaborate idea of the soul's pilgrimage in the afterlife, including its testing and judgment by the gods. To an Egyptian, the afterlife was so real that elaborate preparations were made for the heavenly journey, as seen in the giant pyramids still standing today.

Reincarnation is another concept of life beyond death. Basically, it is a rather crude belief in the passing of the soul at death into another body, either human or animal. Reincarnation was conceived by the American Indians, the Egyptians and eastern religions. It is not taught in the Bible.

...through a

PHYSICAL RESURRECTION

We know that man in his natural state is mortal, and that no part of him survives the tomb. When he dies, he is laid in the grave to await the Second Coming of Christ. All hope of a future life depends upon a resurrection, the restoring of life to the physical body. The common belief of a "reunion of body and soul" is not the Biblical idea of resurrection and cannot be found in the Scriptures.

OLD TESTAMENT BELIEF

in the RESURRECTION

Contrary to the opinion of some Bible scholars, the Hebrews early believed in a physical resurrection.

Abraham

God promised Abraham the land he could see for an "*everlasting possession*," yet at the time of Sarah's death it was necessary for Abraham to buy a piece of ground for a burying place for her (Genesis 23), The promise was not yet in his possession. At the time of Abraham's death the promise was yet future.

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Abraham died *“not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off.”* Abraham’s belief is also shown in his willingness to offer up Isaac *“concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead”* (Heb. 11:13, 19).

Balaam

This man, erstwhile spokesman of God to the children of Israel, also knew about a future resurrection. Speaking of Christ he prophesied, *“I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near”* (Num. 24:17). Balaam’s prophecy was for *“the latter days”*; he knew that all then living would sleep in death before they would see the Christ.

David

David expressed his belief in a resurrection: *“God will redeem my soul [me] from the power of the grave”* (Ps. 49:15; 16:10).

Isaiah

Isaiah looked forward to being raised at a time when others would also be resurrected: *“Your dead shall live; Together with my dead body they shall arise”* (Isa. 26:19).

Daniel

Daniel prophesied of the resurrection of *“many of them who sleep in the dust of the earth”* and was assured by the angel that he himself would *“arise...at the end of the days”* (Dan. 12:2, 13).

Hosea

Hosea, a prophet in the days of the kings, had Divine foreknowledge of the resurrection. God, through Hosea, said: *“I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death”* (Hos. 13:14).

Job

The patriarch Job was confident of his own resurrection, that in the end he would in his own flesh see God (Job 19:25). Writing some two millenniums in advance he said confidently, *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth.”*

There are two points to note especially in this text. First, Job was not expressing his belief in an event which had already happened, but only his trust in the God who had promised it *would* happen. Job’s was a certainty born of absolute faith in God. In Job’s time, the Redeemer had not yet been born, much less resurrected. Yet he said, *“I know that my Redeemer lives.”* Then there is the second point of Job’s personal belief in a personal resurrection. *“And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God.”* Job was confident. His Redeemer would live—and he himself would see Him.

NEW TESTAMENT BELIEF in a PHYSICAL RESURRECTION Jesus

Jesus believed in and taught the resurrection. Each time He foretold His own death, He coupled it with the assurance that He would be *“raised again the third day”* (Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19). He even proved the surety of God’s ability to restore life to a dead body by raising three individuals from death: Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain, and Jairus’ daughter.

Martha, the sister of Lazarus, showed her understanding of the Resurrection as she talked with Jesus after Lazarus’ death. When Jesus said to her: *“Your brother will rise again,”* she answered, *“I know that*

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he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:23-24). By raising Lazarus at that time, Jesus was only restoring him to mortal life, after which he again died. He is again sleeping in the grave, awaiting the Resurrection at Jesus' second coming.

Differing beliefs on the resurrection caused a division between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Pharisees believing in a bodily resurrection and the Sadducees rejecting the teaching. Jesus answered the Sadducees in these words: "*You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God*" (Matt. 22:29), showing both that the doctrine of the resurrection was taught in the Scriptures and that raising the dead was within God's power.

The Sadducees were apparently unconvinced even after Jesus' resurrection. Paul again brought up the controversy when he appeared before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (Acts 23:6-8).

The Significance of the Resurrection

The resurrection is of the utmost importance to every individual Christian believer. In a resurrection lies our only hope of future life. Because we are powerless to raise ourselves, our only hope of life beyond death rests in God and His power to impart new, resurrected life.

The resurrection is an integral part of God's plan for this earth. In no other way could all the covenant-makers of all ages, both faithful and unfaithful, be brought together to Judgment. And a Judgment at which all covenant-makers are present is the plan of God. Said Paul: "*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad*" (2 Cor. 5:10). Without a resurrection this would not be possible.

The VERITY OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

How can we be certain that Jesus Christ actually rose and that therefore a resurrection is a real possibility for us?

Luke recorded that Jesus showed Himself alive "*by many infallible proofs*" (Acts 1:3). Let us review some of these proofs.

The Testimony of the Angels

The first announcement of the resurrection of Jesus was spoken by an angel to the women at the tomb: "*He is not here: for He is risen, as he said*" (Matt. 28:6). Each of the Gospels contains a similar record.

The Testimony of Jesus Himself

Jesus had told His disciples that He would be raised the third day, but His words had fallen on deaf ears. When His resurrection became a visible reality, it was still hard for them to believe. Jesus upbraided them with those immortal words, "*O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe,*" and proceeded to expound the Scriptures to them. Later as He met with the Eleven He offered as evidence the print of the nails in His hands and feet. And in His revelation delivered to John, He gave us the strongest proof possible—His own testimony: "*I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore*" (Rev. 1:18).

The Testimony of the Apostles

Immediately after Jesus' ascension, the apostles went out and "*preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*" (Acts 4:2). They were convinced, and their teaching was convincing so that as many as five

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thousand were added to the church at one time (Acts 4:4). Peter testified that *“This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses”* (Acts 2:32).

The Testimony of Paul

In his defense before King Agrippa, Paul said that he spoke nothing but what had been foretold by the prophets and Moses. Among these things was this: that *“Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead”* (Acts 26:22-23). In his letter to the Corinthian brethren Paul also told of others who saw Jesus after His resurrection: *“He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time”* (1 Cor. 15:5-8). Paul had seen for himself; he knew what he was talking about.

The Testimony of Peter

Peter spoke of the resurrection of Christ as the source of their *living hope*: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (1 Pet. 1:3). Peter was an eyewitness also, and he was sure of his testimony. As he said in his Second Epistle, *“we did not follow cunningly devised fables”* (2 Pet. 1:16). He knew Christ had died and been raised and testified to the fact many times in his preaching (see Acts 2:24, 31-32; 3:15; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:31; 1 Pet. 1:21).

Secular Evidence

Historians offer a strange treatment of the resurrection. Most history books use one of two devices. The first is silence. After mentioning the death of Jesus, they immediately shift to the growth of the early Church in Jerusalem, leaving the reader to wonder what the Church had to “grow on.” Their second method is to qualify the report of the resurrection. For example: “Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning, so His followers confidently believed.” Or, “according to the claims made in the Gospels...,” etc. But what a weak treatment of an event which carries so weighty a line of evidence!

Much Christian literature refers to Jesus’ resurrection and the empty tomb as phenomena that can be approached only by faith, not through history. This, however, is not true, especially in the case of the empty tomb. Nor is all evidence for the resurrection phenomena confined to the New Testament, as so many assume.

Any ancient historian would have to admit that a profound religious explosion occurred in Jerusalem shortly after Christ’s crucifixion, with repercussions that shook even distant Rome. A pagan Roman author who detested Christianity had to admit that only thirty-one years after the death of Jesus, “a great number” of his followers in the distant imperial capital believed so strongly in his resurrection that they gave up their lives in Nero’s great persecution (Tacitus, *Annals*, xv:44).

As the historian moves closer to Judea to examine the evidence, he is impressed with the variety of what, in our atomic age, might be called the “fallout” from the resurrection explosion. The psychological change in the disciples is striking. What transformed Peter, the man who could be unhinged by questions from a servant girl, into so bold a spokesman for the faith that the whole Sanhedrin could not silence him? If the disciples had deceitfully tried to bring a new faith in the world—motivated by some hazy wish—fulfillment—would they have gone on to give their very lives for this fraud? Clearly, they deemed themselves eyewitnesses of the risen Christ.

What about the transformation of Jesus’ doubting brother James, and the great persecutor Saul?

The birth and growth of the Church itself, its survival and rapid expansion, offer telling evidence for a mighty launching. Could it all have been rooted in a fraud, or did something happen that resurrection

morning that changed the whole picture?

Actually, in point of fact, the resurrection has much more evidence for it than does, for instance, the assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March in 44 B.C. Why will historians not give to the resurrection of Christ the same status of historical fact—especially with so many eyewitness reports—in the four Gospels, the Acts, and the letters of Peter and Paul? yet most historians today still quietly refuse to accept these.

The Testimony of the “Empty Tomb”

There is another aspect of the evidence for the resurrection of Christ often overlooked. It is the phenomenon of the empty tomb. Both the Gospels and the early Church affirmed, “*He is not here*” and then immediately added, “*He is risen,*” with this additional thrust: “*Come, see the place where the Lord lay.*”

There is extremely important historical evidence for the empty tomb. It deals with the question: Where did the Christian church come from? To this the answer must be: Jerusalem. But this is the very *last* place it could have started if Jesus’ tomb had remained occupied, since anyone producing a dead Jesus would have driven a wooden stake through the heart of any such Christianity based on a supposed resurrection. What happened in Jerusalem seven weeks after the first Resurrection could have taken place only if Jesus’ body were somehow missing from Joseph’s tomb, for otherwise the Temple establishment, in its imbroglio with the apostles, would simply have aborted the movement by making a brief trip over to the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea and unveiling the contents. They did not do this, however, because they knew the tomb was empty. Their official explanation for it—that the disciples had stolen the body—was an open admission that the sepulcher was indeed vacant.

The objection will arise: But the supposed failure of the authorities to produce Jesus’ body rests only on New Testament sources.

True, it rests on them, but not on them *only*. There is also a wealth of evidence from purely Jewish and Roman sources and traditions, ranging from Josephus to the fifth-century compilation. What is important about these references, which also admit an empty tomb, is that they are what historians term “positive evidence from a hostile source,” which is the strongest kind of historical evidence.

Well into the second century A.D., and long after Matthew recorded its first instance, the Jerusalem authorities continued to admit an empty tomb by ascribing it to the disciples’ stealing the body. Justin Martyr, who came from neighboring Samaria, reported about 150 A.D. that Judean authorities even sent specially commissioned men across the Mediterranean to counter Christian claims with this explanation of the resurrection. And Justin Martyr lived close to New Testament Judea in both space and time. He was intimately enough acquainted with other details of the life of Christ that he could report that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that he personally had seen some plows and yokes made by Joseph and Jesus in their carpenter shop up in Nazareth, which he thought of excellent, durable quality.

Does any early source, friendly or hostile, claim that Jesus’ tomb was *occupied* after the time of the resurrection, that the sepulcher was *not* empty? Such a claim would have been an obvious slash through the Resurrection proclamations of the early Church. Yet no authority in any way close to the event in space or time makes this claim. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources or archeology that would disprove this statement. Is not all this tremendous evidence for the certainty of the resurrection of Christ?

Does this, then, prove the Resurrection? An empty tomb may not prove a resurrection, but a resurrection would require an empty tomb. Its occupancy, indeed, would have effectively *disproved* it.

The Resurrection—Who Will Rise?

The Divine plan is stated clearly: “*The dead in Christ shall rise.*” All who during their lifetime made it their choice to serve God have the promise of a resurrection should they be sleeping at His second

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coming. The resurrection will not include all who ever lived on this earth. Such a teaching is not Scriptural.

Those who have never known God or His law will never be raised to stand in Judgment. All such “*shall sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake,*” and “*shall be as though they had never been*” (Jer. 51:57; Obad. 16). We learn from Paul that “*as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law ...sin is not imputed when there is no law*” (Rom. 2:12; 5:13). They are the ones who in death have “*no advantage over animals*” (Eccl. 3:19). They are well described by the Psalmist: “*A man who is in honor, yet does not understand, is like the beasts that perish ... They shall never see light*” (49:20, 19). The Bible gives no hint of a resurrection for animals.

Knowledge brings responsibility. Everyone who has ever learned God’s will and agreed to serve Him will be brought to Judgment. Jesus said, “*If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin*” (John 15:22). Before they knew the law they had a cloak of ignorance; after they knew the law they were amenable to Judgment. In Jesus’ parable He calls His “*own servants*” and “*reckons with them.*” All who have agreed to serve Him comprise the “*all*” who shall stand before Him at Judgment (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10).

The Resurrection—to Mortality or Immortality?

Since both the living and the resurrected dead must appear before the Judgment seat of Christ, they must be resurrected mortal. The resurrection merely restores the dead to mortal life in fleshly bodies. The “*wages of sin is death*” (Rom. 6:23), hence resurrected sinners must die a second death after Judgment. Were they to be resurrected immortal this would not be possible, as both faithful and unfaithful would be in possession of eternal life.

In Paul’s long discourse on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, he pictures the dead being raised to mortal life and afterwards those worthy exalted to immortal life. In verse 36 where he uses the simile of a seed being placed in the ground, he is not picturing the placing of a dead body in the earth as generally believed. The age-old plan of sowing grain was to sow or cast it out on the surface of the ground. Handfuls of grain were taken from the sack and broadcast on the plowed field. Hence, the dead are “sown” when the graves are opened and they are cast out upon the open ground, merely restored to the level of the living, later to be judged and, if worthy, raised to immortality.

Paul uses this simile in verse 42: “*So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown [cast out of the grave onto the surface of the ground] in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body*” (vs. 42-44). The subjects of the resurrection will be released from their graves mortal, in “*dishonor,*” in “*weakness,*” “*natural bodies.*” Then after receiving the approval of the Judge, they will receive the “*better resurrection,*” (Heb. 11:35), exalted to the heights of immortality “*in incorruption*”; “*in glory*”; in “*power*”; “*a spiritual body.*”

In verses 45-46, Paul continues to compare the condition of the faithful servants before and after they have experienced the raising to immortality. “*The first man Adam became a living being,*” an “*animate being,*” the “*The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*” “*However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.*” In the resurrection of the dead, the mortal, natural life will come first, then the immortal life, the lifting to a higher plane of physical life, the change from mortality to immortality.

Then verse 50 fits perfectly into this picture; “*Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.*” Though both mortal and immortal beings are alike real and tangible, there is a vast difference between the two natures. Physical corruption cannot inherit physical incorruption, nor can immortal perfection be adversely affected by physical corruption. We cannot inherit the Kingdom of God in our mortal state; we must be changed, transformed into the physical likeness of Christ (Phil. 3:21), before we can share in His Kingdom.

IMMORTALITY

According to the dictionary, immortality means “not subject to the destruction of time and death; unending existence; uninterrupted survival; eternal life.” But as understood by a major portion of the Christian world today, it refers to the doctrine that the human personality exists for eternity in spite of the event of physical death.

The idea of a continued existence after death has been popular from ancient times. But such a belief is not to be found in the Scriptures. The concept of the soul as a separable part of the person is not to be found in either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian New Testament. Much of the doctrine of an immortal soul can be traced to the Greeks. It was their belief that the soul or spirit of man was in its essence eternal, not subject to the destruction of death, and would therefore continue forever. The idea was popular with Greek philosophers who took up the thought and expanded it. Plato played a major part in the development of the theory, introducing many arguments (not religious) in an effort to prove that the soul could not be destroyed. These arguments have had a definite influence on the general acceptance of the belief.

Though promulgators of the theory of the immortal soul may be sincere, the Scriptures do not uphold the doctrine. As stated earlier, man does not have a soul; he is a soul. And man is mortal, not immortal.

Immortality Is...

Immortality means “unending existence; eternal life; uninterrupted survival; a state of exemption from death.” The Bible definition agrees: “*those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, ...nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels*” (Luke 20:35-36).

A Future—Not Present—State

The Bible clearly states that Jesus Christ is the only one of our earthborn race who has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16). Even Jesus Christ did not possess immortality from the beginning, but was rewarded with immortality in the presence of His Father after He had spent His mortal life doing the will of His Father, learning obedience “*by the things which he suffered*” (Heb. 10:7; 5:8-9). At present He is *the first* and *only* member of our earthly race to receive eternal life as promised by God. But being our perfect example, He is our assurance that if we follow in His footsteps (1 Pet. 2:21), we too shall receive immortality.

According to Paul, Christ “*has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel*” (2 Tim. 1:10). Through His teaching in the Gospels, Jesus shed light on the subject of immortality and life. By virtue of a righteous life He has been resurrected from the dead and exalted to immortality, thus showing how the power of death can be broken. Immortality is conditional; it is the reward to be given to those who do His will and purify themselves from every sin.

Immortality—How?

Since it is evident from the Bible that man is not immortal, how does or can he become immortal?

Immortality is to be sought for. It is for those “*who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality*” (Rom. 2:7). It is a state to be put on in the end; it is not our possession now. “*For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality*” (1 Cor. 15:53). It is the recompense to be received by the just (Luke 14:14).

Immortality is assured for the future by adding virtue to our character now—knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness and charity—“*for if you do these things, you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and*

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Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:5-11).

Immortality—When?

In the future, at Christ’s return. “...and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Pet. 5:4). “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness” (2 Tim. 4:8).

Immortality—a Promise

Paul labored, “in hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began” (Titus 1:2; 3:7). “And this is the promise that he has promised us— eternal life” (1 John 2:25).

Equal to the Angels

None of us have seen an angel, but for many years angels were pictured as spirit beings, winged creatures, hovering about the throne of God. Hence, many people think of them in this way.

However, the Scriptures do not uphold this description. Angels are glorified mortals with supernatural capabilities. Angels were once human as we ourselves, but through a righteous life they made themselves worthy to have their mortal bodies changed, made immortal. This belief accords with Scripture. The angel who delivered the message to John the Revelator described himself as a “fellow servant,” saying “*For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God*” (Rev. 22:9).

The original Hebrew and Greek words translated “angels” mean simply “messengers” and their principal function in the Bible was that of ministering to human need. Many times angels were described as “men,” as in the case of the angelic visits to Abraham, Manoah, and Daniel.

In Summary

We are created, living, intelligent beings. But our nature is in every respect, according to the Bible, mortal. There is no spirit, personality, or soul within us that is immortal or undying about us.

What happens when we die? We simply cease to breathe, hence cease to exist. There is nothing frightful, horrifying or torturous about death. Death is a sleep, a state of total unconsciousness. For “*there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going*” (Eccl. 9:10).

All hope of life beyond death depends upon a physical resurrection of the body. The God who created life in the beginning is capable of restoring it, as was evidenced in the resurrection of Christ. All who sleep “in Christ” will be resurrected, judged and rewarded, and those who have served God faithfully will have their physical bodies changed and made “*like un to His [Christ’s] glorious body*” (Phil. 3:20-21), made incorruptible, undying.

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STUDY GUIDE

Can You Answer These?

1. What is life?
2. What is doth?
3. What is a soul?
4. What happens to the soul at death? Give Bible evidence.
5. What is the spirit that leaves the body at death? Explain Eccl. 12:7.
6. Show from the Bible that we do not have immortality now.
7. Define “resurrection.” Who has already been resurrected?
8. To what level of life will the resurrected dead be restored?
9. Who will be resurrected when Christ returns?
10. Who of our mortal race is now immortal? When will immortality be bestowed?

(If you need assistance in answering these questions, refer to your Bible and the pages of this lesson.)