

# Immortality Is Conditional

By

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When the local cemetery was filled to capacity in Mortsels, Belgium, the authorities sent a strange letter to the citizens of that municipality. "Please," the letter said, "as far as possible, do not overtax the local services until a new burial ground is available."

Somehow - "as far as possible" - the citizens were to postpone death until the burial dilemma was solved.

As foolish as this appeal may seem, it is no more foolish than the idea expressed at many funerals that there is no death; that the dead person has not died, that, in fact, no one ever dies, but merely leaves his body behind and continues in some mysterious existence which makes him more alive than ever! After doing everything possible to keep someone alive, when he is dead they say, "He hasn't really died."

Of all that the Bible teaches, nothing is clearer than the fact that man dies. But what is death? What happens at death? Of some eighty-three articles that have appeared in *The Witness* since its beginning in 1960, the greatest response has been elicited from the issues dealing with man's destiny: resurrection to eternal life, or to Judgment and eternal death. As the Dean of an independent Bible College put it: "This subject is emotionally charged and tradition laden," so I, myself, approached it with fear and trembling but also with firm conviction from biblical research.

According to tradition in many religions, the body is not considered to be part of man's essential nature. This leaves the concept of death open to all manner of superstition with regard to: belief in ghosts, prayers to the dead and the morbid fear of the disapproval of a deceased father or mother. This teaching, however, does not come from the Bible. The Bible holds man to be a created, organic entity whose death is the death of the person, the whole man. Scripture teaches that resurrection of the body is essential to man's having eternal life. Death, therefore, not only touches the body, but the rest of man as well. It is not something that simply happens to the body leaving the "soul" intact. As a matter of fact, the Bible does not teach that man possesses a "soul" as an entity, that is, as a separate or self-contained life that goes on as the person in spite of man's death. On the contrary, it teaches that man himself is a soul. "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 SOUL" (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word for "soul", which is *nephesh*, is used not only for man in Genesis 2:7, but also for other living creatures mentioned in Genesis, Chapters 1 and 2. The water swarms with "soul of life" or "living souls" (1:20). And God created sea monsters and all the "creeping living souls" with which the waters abound. (1:21). All the living creatures, animals and reptiles are called "living souls" (Genesis 1:24-25). The scripture does not say that man possesses a soul, but rather that he is a soul or a "living being." When God gave man "the breath of life," man – both body and breath

– became a soul. Isaiah declared, “He gives breath unto people upon the earth.” Zechariah wrote, “He formed the spirit of man within him.” Daniel said to Belshazzar, “The God in whose hand thy breath is ...” In the book of Job it is written, “The spirit of God has made me and the breath of the Almighty has given me life” (Job 33:4). Moreover, scripture states that “the soul that sins it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20).

Jacob, when told that Joseph was dead, said . . . “I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning” (Genesis 37:35). Apparently he had no concept of meeting Joseph in a spirit world. God said to David, “When thy days are fulfilled... thou shall sleep with thy fathers” (2 Samuel 7:12). Daniel writes of a resurrection “of them that sleep in the dust of the earth” (Daniel 12:2). It has happened to them as God declared to Adam: “For dust thou art and unto dust shall thou return” (Genesis 3:19).

Christ spoke of the dead maiden as “sleeping” (Matthew 9:24 and Luke 8:52). He said of Lazarus, “Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep” (John 11:11). When He went to restore life to Lazarus, He spoke at the mouth of the tomb, saying, “Lazarus, come forth” and that which came forth was the entire man bound in grave cloths. So Jesus says of all the dead, “The hour comes in which all that are in the tombs shall hear His voice and shall come forth” (John 5:28-29).

At this point, I would interject two thoughts for the sake of clarification. First, I do not presume to know exactly how the spirit or breath “returns to God.” We do know that the force which gives life to man is sustained by God. Science knows nothing about the power of this life force which the scripture calls the *breath of life* or *spirit*. We know from scripture that “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). When the life blood of Jesus was given in His death, the scripture said that “He poured out His soul into death” (Isaiah 53:12). While the Bible does not give a scientific definition of “spirit” or “breath of life,” it does indicate that when death comes, the person as a human entity, is dead; therefore, death is not just something that happens to the body, but is the state in which the breath or spirit is withheld by God’s power and apart from the body in which it functions.

Second, contrary to some accusations, this view is not a doctrine of annihilation. Although the body dies and returns to dust, it is not annihilated. The spirit, apart from the body, returns to God and, hence, is not annihilated, but does cease to be man. When both spirit and body are fused together by God’s power (as man was created originally), man is produced and is called a living soul. In the present state, the soul, or man, is mortal, being subject to death. At the resurrection, righteous man will be raised without any possibility of death and, therefore, immortal. The unrighteous will be raised also, but only to be sentenced to death again in the lake of fire, which is called the second death, and this time man’s destruction will be final and everlasting. Life – call it physical or spiritual – is created by God, springs from God and must be sustained by God. “He gives to all life, breath and all things,” said Paul (Acts 17:25). Jesus claimed to have the power of life: “As the Father has life in Himself; so has He given to the Son to have life in Himself” ... “even so the Son also gives life to whom He will” (John 5:26 & 21) If Jesus does not choose to give life, then that life ceases to exist.

The Hebrew letter states that Christ is “upholding all things by the word of His power...” (Hebrews 1:3) Therefore, man does not possess immortality or the quality of eternity by any natural right or by any inherent power within himself. As Saurin has said, “God draws existence from His own store. We possess but a borrowed existence; being is not native to us. As in our turn, one by one, we shall pass out of this life, and the world will go on its way without us; so, if God willed, we might pass out of being, and the universe would not miss us.” (Quoted from *the Christian Appeal*)

What then of the eternal life that is said to be the possession of the Christian? John writes that “that you may know that you have eternal life” (John 5:13). But, does this mean that the Christian does not die, but simply goes into life of another dimension at the death of his body? So it is thought by the Roman Catholic Church, and so it is generally thought by most Protestants. Does the possession of eternal life mean that we already enjoy such life and, therefore, will not die? Obviously not. Paul writes that “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then they also that have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Corinthians 15:18). This passage shows us that the Christian does not already possess the quality of eternal life, for if he did, Paul could not have said that he would have “perished” in case there is no resurrection. When the Christian dies, he does not pass into a state of immortality nor life eternal, and will not inherit his immortality until the resurrection.

Furthermore, if to know that we already have eternal life meant that we already possess the quality of immortality or eternity, it would mean that one could not possibly be lost. Yet scripture abounds in warning to Christians not to be deceived, not to sin, and not to lose their faith lest they lose their inheritance of eternal life; therefore, the statement that we know we have eternal life does not say that we possess the quality of immortality or the actual being of eternal nature, but simply that we may know that this quality or gift of life is forthcoming at the proper time, namely, at Christ’s return.

While the comparison is over-simplified, death may be compared to an ordinary everyday phenomenon – turning out the light: turn off the switch and the electricity ceases to surge through the bulb. The bulb is still there, but it gives no light – it is dead. The electricity is still in existence. The generators roar and somewhere the power flows through other bulbs, sparking them to life and to light and power. But this bulb is lifeless. The power for that particular bulb is gone. Yet it still remains under the control of the hand that moves the switch. Flip the switch, and once again the bulb leaps to life.

So God holds the spirit of every created being. When the spirit returns to God, the man is dead. As long as the spirit remains separated from the body, there is no life. If this breath of life were never to be reunited with the body, the person, as a “living soul,” would be dead. As Paul puts it, he would have perished. But, thank God, there will be a day when the hand that controls the switch will once again give life to the mortal body. That body – whether dead and decayed a thousand years or only a day – will be resurrected, the breath of life will be restored to it so that the power of life will again flow and the man once again may be a “living soul.” Some Conclusions:

Man is not immortal, but mortal.

Immortality is possible only through the Christ who has authority to grant it.

Immortality will be granted upon the condition that one is redeemed by Christ; hence, the term "Conditional Immortality."

Finally, it was because man is mortal and subject to death that Jesus came into the world as a mortal, flesh and blood man. "We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). If, as tradition teaches, death does not affect the basic life of man, then the death of Jesus would be meaningless as far as man's salvation is concerned.

But man does die. This is the whole problem. If, in the Day of Judgment, he is resurrected in a sinful state, he must face God for his crime and receive the punishment of death, a death that is final and everlasting. Unbelievers will be put to death in a literal Hell called the lake of fire, and also called the second death. The destruction wrought by this fire will include the destruction of the present earth as described in 2 Peter 3:1-13.

Fortunately, there is a way of escape from this terrible destiny. By Christ's death in your place, you may be justified before God and thus rescued from the final power of death. This is the only way man may hope to become immortal. Have you this hope?

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