

Life in the Son

By

Curtis Dickinson

If we are to speak biblically, we may not speak of the “immortality of the soul” as is so commonly done. It is not a biblical expression, but one derived from pagan philosophy, primarily from the Greeks. The Bible hope is not grounded on man having an already immortal soul, but upon his obtaining immortality through Christ.

The Bible teaches that Christ “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). The target of the gospel was the problem of death: mortality, with the object of giving immortality to believers only. The import of this powerful truth has been diluted by the tradition that man already has immortality, that from the moment life begins he has an “immortal soul” which can never die.

If every soul is inherently immortal, the edge of the gospel is automatically dulled. If everyone for thousands of years already had immortality— if Plato’s concept of it were correct—then there was no need for the gospel to bring it to light as Paul stated. Why should Christ die to bring us immortality if we already had it? Death loses its contextual meaning in the gospel if everyone is immortal.

Life is a gift. It is not the property of man to have life in himself. Paul said that God Himself “gives to all life, and breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). Jesus said that “As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He will” (John 5:21). It is not the property of man to have life in himself, it is the property of God. Life is received from God and is forfeited by sin. Man can receive immortal life only upon the conditions set up by God.

Even Christian still die, although we do possess eternal life by faith. Our victory over death is not accomplished in us yet. It is not until the resurrection or coming of Christ that we will be given immortality. “For...this mortal must put on immortality...” (I Cor. 15:53).

According to the Genesis record, Adam and Eve were driven from the garden lest they eat of the tree of life and “live forever” (Gen. 3:22–24). Such purpose would appear meaningless if all sinners have life that is immortal to live forever.

The record says that “God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His son” (I John 5:11), and “He that has the Son has life, and he that has not the Son of God has not life” (Vs. 12). It is certainly hard to harmonize this scriptures with the philosophy that “all men live forever in bliss or in misery.”

The golden text of John 3:16 says that “God so loved the world that whosoever believes on Him should not perish but have eternal life.” How then can one obtain life, except through Christ? And does it not nullify the whole verse if we say that everyone already possesses everlasting life? Concerning his sheep Jesus said, “And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish” (John 10:28). Here is the clear implication that man is subject death, as contrasted to the possibility of life; that man will perish, unless he belongs to the great Shepherd, who will give life to all His sheep.

But what about this? Someone will ask, “What about the expression of the Lord that some shall go away to eternal destruction? Must not the punishment for one last as

long as the life for the other?" Note that the word is "destruction" not "destroying." The punishment for sin is death. Having been punished by death, the punishment stands forever. Destruction indicates a point of termination, the end! The thing destroyed is destroyed for all eternity. Were God to be forever engaged in the process of punishing people who could not be destroyed because they are immortal, it could not be called "destruction," for they would never be destroyed.

The destruction of all rebels will take place when Christ returns and raises all the dead to life to face judgment. Their punishment consists in a final and irrevocable death. The scriptures say they will **be slain** (Isa. 65:15), Luke 19:27), **be destroyed** (I Cor. 3:17, Psa. 37:38, 92:7, Mt. 10:28), **suffer destruction** (Psa. 73:18, Mt. 7:13, Phil. 3:19, I Thess. 1:9), **perish** (Psa. 37:20, Luke 15:3, II Peter 2:12), **be consumed** (Psa. 37:20, Isa. 1:28), **suffer death** (Rom. 6:21, 23, Rev. 21:8), **be burned up** (Heb. 6:8, Mt. 3:12, Malachi 4:1, II Peter 3:7, 10).

Here are a great number of scriptures that plainly indicate that the sinner has no inherent life within himself, and that his life will come to a horrible end in the day of judgment. God, who created man in the first place and made him a "living soul" (Gen. 2:7) is also able to destroy him, and this is exactly what He promises to do to all who do not receive His grace as offered through Jesus the Christ. Such destruction will, indeed, be everlasting and eternal.

The total man. It is not uncommon to hear people talk about "saving the soul" as if the soul were some ethereal entity that lived somewhere behind his eyeballs and which was to be saved without regard to the rest of the person. The idea has the effect of saying that one is not so concerned with his life as he is with that unknown entity that is to be turned over to God at death. We hear the idea in hymns and songs in which the body is treated as some kind of shell that we simply have to carry around until it falls apart, then we are released for some kind of other-life experience.

The early church had a struggle in overcoming this Greek concept of "soul." When Paul preached to them in Athens he declared the hope of life as a resurrection from the dead, in contrast to the Greek philosophy of an immortal soul. The philosophers would no longer listen to him. In tears to follow, men such as Origen and Augustine, who are considered authorities in the Roman Catholic church, developed the doctrine of the "immortal soul" of Plato. Earlier Christians, such as Peter, Paul, Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Irenaeus opposed the Greek idea and held that man has hope only through a resurrection, and that if he misses that, then he perishes (I Cor. 15:18. Even Tertullian, who preached that one had an "immortal soul," was quick to point out that without the resurrection of the body no one would attain heaven.

In the Old Testament the word that is translated "soul" and is used approximately 500 times in the Old Testament always connotes "animal life" or "breath of life," that is, the principle of life within the body and not something that is apart from the body. It is never used to indicate some entity that is separated from the body and that lives independent of the body. The Old Testament speaks of souls dying and souls being saved, referring to the entire person.

In the New Testament, the Greek word which is translated "soul" and is used about sixty times, simply refers to life. In Christ's ministry, He used the term with reference to the entire person. Instead of teaching that everyone has an immortal soul that must live somewhere after death, Jesus emphasized that life, eternal life, is conditional

and that He will give it to whomsoever He will and that only upon the conditions that He laid down.

The apostles dealt with man in his totality, and did not split him into perishable and imperishable segments. The whole man is mortal. The whole man will suffer the punishment of final death unless redeemed from sin.

The solution. The problem of man in the 21st century is the same as it was in the beginning, that he has set himself forth as wiser than his Creator. In rejecting the Creator he is denying the Creator's purpose, that man is to be in God's image. Thus he rejects any cause for the Creator to sustain or to give him life. The purpose of God has not changed. "You shall be perfect," He continues to tell us. Of the saved John says, "We shall be like Him" (I John 3:2). But for all who continue in alienation from Him, there remains only destruction in the day of judgment. Life will have to come to an end. This will be a reversal of the creation in which God spoke man into existence. He will also, by the breath of His mouth, speak him out of existence.

God, who gave life in the first place, also gives a solution to man's dilemma, that he might have life forever. The remedy for sin is met by Christ Himself. Entering into the world in the mortal flesh of man, He accepted the guilt of sin and suffered its penalty by His own death. In God's words, "He who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Cor. 5:21). Being sinless, we may be raised up to immortality in the likeness of Christ, and thus fulfill the original and eternal purpose of God.

Life is offered on God's terms. We must retrace the downward flight of Adam back upward to God. Where Adam disbelieved and failed to trust God, we must believe and trust His word, that He will provide what is good. Where Adam was determined to make up his own rules and decide for himself right and wrong, we must learn the rules of God and determine to follow them. Where Adam disobeyed and did that which God explicitly forbade, we must obey and do that which he said to be saved.

This is conversion. It is becoming a new creature in Christ, and is absolutely essential if we are to have life. At the core the condition is faith, faith that God has spoken in His word, that His word is true, that our lives will be saved and immortality given according to His terms, on His conditions. The agnosticism and cynicism which denies the truth of God's revelation must also reject His conditions for life, and therefore look for some other kind of life on other terms; hence, the popularity of eastern mysticism and the cults.

Life is completely at God's disposal—all of life. The total man was created by God and called a "living soul." The total man may also be destroyed by God because of his sin and rebellion. But the total man is also salvageable. This is the meaning of "salvation"—that Jesus died for our sins so that we may be saved (salvaged) from the final destruction in the day of God's wrath.

This is the theme of the Bible, that life is forfeited by man because of sin, but that it is given back to man through Jesus Christ. This is the good news, the gospel. We live in a world that is terminal, doomed, because of sin, but there is great hope, hope for everyone who meets the conditions God has given for life. This was the commission of Jesus to His disciples, that we should go and preach this good news to all creation, because all creation lies in the throes of death until the conditions for life are met.

Christ's words still apply. "He that believes and is immersed shall be saved"
(Mark 16:16).

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