

IMMORTALITY? NOT YET!

BY

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Tradition and philosophy are often more convincing and captivating than the plain and simple truth. This was forcefully demonstrated at a recent funeral where two pastors spoke eloquently concerning the dead man who lay in the casket before them. However, they refused to acknowledge his death, and sought to convince everyone present that he was more alive than ever and, in fact, was looking down on the funeral scene while he frolicked with the angels. Of course, not one word was said about the resurrection, the only hope the Bible gives for believers who have died. Their idea that one begins life in heaven or hell at the moment of death makes resurrection superfluous.

JUST WHAT IS A SOUL? In spite of frequent assertions from evangelists that you “have an immortal soul” and must choose where it will spend eternity, this doctrine is not found in Scripture. “A doctrine of the immortality of the soul is not stated in the Bible and is not clearly defined in early rabbinical literature” (Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966). The idea originated in paganism, was popularized by Plato, and eventually permeated the entire Roman Empire by the time of Christ. “The Platonic and Neo-Platonic assumption of a spiritual and pre-existent soul-substance also underlies the doctrine of the Transmigration of souls which was taken up by the medieval Cabbalists” (Ibid.).

Consider the record of creation: “And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). There is nothing here, or anywhere else in Scriptures, about the Creator “putting a soul” in man. Rather, man—the entire person—is a soul.

The Hebrew word translated “soul” here and elsewhere in the Old Testament is *nephesh*. “And God said, Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures (*nephesh*)...and God created great whales and every living creature (*nephesh*) that moves...” “...let the earth bring forth living creatures (*nephesh*) after their kind, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth” (Gen 1:20, 21, 24).

The first four times this Hebrew word is used it has reference to fish, fowl or animal, and the fifth time, (Gen. 2:7, quoted above), it refers to man. Why wasn't it rendered “soul” in all cases? It appears that the translators, already committed to the notion that man has an immortal soul, were unwilling to reveal the fact that animals are also “souls”.

This word, *nephesh*, occurs 754 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, and is used for life, person, self, heart, mind, body, dead body, man, and in 24 other different ways, but never does it indicate or insinuate something immortal within a body of a living creature, man included.

In the New Testament, originally written and distributed in the Greek language, the word *psuche*, occurs 105 times. Usually it is translated as “soul,” but is also translated by six other words. Like *nephesh*, the word *psuche* is also used for lower animals, as in Revelation 8:9, which reads: “The third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life (*psuche*), died” (CF. Rev. 16:3).

These two words occur 859 times in the Greek scriptures, but are never used in the sense of an “immortal soul” or “ghost,” as a conscious entity which leaves the body at death. It may seem so in some English versions, but that is not its meaning in the Hebrew or Greek texts.

The point is that neither man nor animals are bipartite creatures consisting of a body plus a soul that can be separated and continue to live. Thusly Leviticus 17:11 states that “the life (*nephesh* = soul) of the flesh is in the blood.” The Biblical “soul” is the whole person, either a living or dead person.

SOULS ARE NOT IMMORTAL. The first lie is focused on this issue. God had said that Adam and Eve would surely die if they ate of the forbidden tree. Satan said, “You will NOT surely die” (Gen. 3:4). But God was found to be true, and Satan a liar (John 8:44). To Adam God said, “You are dust and you shall return to dust” (Gen. 3:19). Man was then excluded from the Garden, “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22). Clearly, there was nothing about Adam that was immortal.

While scripture warns that “the soul that sins it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20), and that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), some hold that this death is “spiritual separation” and not death of the person. But the penalty for sin which was paid for by Jesus was a blood-letting death. Jesus “partook of flesh and blood” in order to defeat the power of death (Heb. 2:14). If the penalty for sin were just a “spiritual separation” the death of Jesus would be meaningless.

As the Lamb of God, Jesus was slain on the cross and for three days was in the grave (hades). Peter cites this fact in declaring the resurrection of Jesus, by quoting the prophecy, “you will not leave my soul (*nephesh*) in *sheol/hades* (gravedom), nor give your holy One to see corruption” (Psa. 16:10). “My soul” is the Hebraism for “myself.” The Hebrew parallelism (saying the same thing twice in different words, for emphasis) confirms the equation of “my soul” with “holy One.” The message is that Jesus was not left in the grave. David, in the Psalms, had foretold of the resurrection of the Messiah, and stated that He (soul, himself) was not abandoned to hades, the place of the dead, but was resurrected to life (Acts 2).

In the same sermon Peter preached he stated that David died, and had NOT ascended up into heaven. It required a resurrection from the grave and death for Jesus to ascend to the Father. Jesus himself had the keys to death and the grave (Rev. 1:18).

IMMORTALITY TO BE GIVEN. While the scripture states that Jesus has “passed into the heavens” to sit at the Father’s right hand, this is never said of any deceased saint. Rather, the figure of “sleep” is used to portray their condition until the resurrection at the future return of Jesus. (Too many scriptures to mention here.)

As already shown, there is nothing in Scripture about an immortal soul. Job looked for a resurrection, saying, “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job. 19:26). Abraham believed in a resurrection, as did David (Heb. 11:19, Psa. 17:15, Acts 2:34).

Paul wrote that immortality is to only be granted on the Day of Resurrection: “Behold, I show you a mystery: We shall all not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when...this mortal shall

have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory” (I Cor. 15:51–54).

While this passage says nothing of the “soul” it certainly indicates that we do not yet possess immortality. At death the body returns to dust and the spirit, or “breath of life,” returns to the Creator, until Jesus returns at the “last day” to give life to the dead through a resurrection. Some reject this truth because it is espoused by so-called unorthodox groups. But it is the teaching of Scripture and was championed by first and second century Christians such as Clement of Rome, a companion of Paul; Ignatius, a friend of Polycarp, who was John’s disciple; Thophilus; Justin Martyr; plus a host of writers who wouldn’t toe-the-line of the institutionalized churches. Since the Bible was made available to everyone able to read and understand it, many writing are still in existence teaching this same truth. And that continues today!

John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, celebrated Bible translators, both strongly denied soul-immortality. Tyndale wrote, “And you, in putting departed souls in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments where with Christ and Paul prove the resurrection, which we are warned to look for every hour...If the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?” (This was said in answer to Sir Thomas Moore’s *Dialogue*, book 4, chapter 2.)

Martin Luther wrote, “All that is said concerning the immortality of the soul...is nothing else but an invention of anti-Christ to make his pot boil.” He held that our hope is resurrection, and said, “I shall arise again and shall speak with you” (*Positive Theology*, by Miles Grant).

In 1513 Pope Leo X issued a decree which condemned “all those who assert that the soul is mortal...” It was aimed at Luther and his friends who preached that no part of man is immortal, but that immortality is God’s gift through Christ, to be conferred upon believers in the Day of Resurrection. The Pope’s decree turned many from hope in a resurrection to belief in an immortal soul.

For religions without Christ an “immortal soul” is essential for any future life, but to the Christian immortal life is assured through Christ when He returns and raises the dead (John 5:21–29).

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