

Chapter 3

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Belief in life after death seems to have come back from the grave. News weeklies cover it. Talk-show hosts discuss it. Popular books such as Moody and Kübler-Ross' *Life after Life* and Maurice Rawlings' *Beyond Death's Door* examine case histories of out-of-body experiences. Even some pastors have begun preaching it again.

Once regarded by the secular community as a relic of a superstitious past and by many religious individuals as something too difficult to comprehend, belief in life after death is regaining popularity. According to a poll conducted by the General Social Survey, "A greater fraction of American adults believe in life after death in the 1990s than in the 1970s."¹

While the percentage of Protestants who believe in life after death has remained stable at 85 percent, noticeably more Catholics and Jews now believe in the concept. "The percentage of Catholics believing in an afterlife rose from 67 percent to 85 percent from 1900 to 1970. Among Jews, this percentage increased from 17 percent (1900) to 74 percent (1970)."²

A survey conducted recently (2003) by the reputable Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, confirms that "the vast majority of Americans continue to believe that there is life after death, that everyone has a soul, and that Heaven and Hell exist."³ "Belief in life after death . . . is widely embraced: 8 out of 10 Americans (81%) believe in an afterlife of some sort. Another 9% said life after death may exist, but they were not certain. Just one out of every ten adults (10%) contends that there is no form of life after one dies on earth. Moreover, a large majority of Americans (79%) agreed with the statement "every person has a soul that will live forever, either in God's presence or absence."⁴

The conscious or subconscious belief in life after death is reflected in the elaborate funeral arrangements intended to preserve the corporeal remains of the deceased. In the ancient world, the dead were provided for

the next life with food, liquids, eating utensils, and clothes. Sometimes even servants and animals were buried with the corpse to provide the necessary conveniences in the next life.

Today, the mortuary rituals are different, but they still reveal a subconscious belief in life after death. The corpse is embalmed and hermetically sealed in a galvanized metal casket to retard decay. It is dressed in the finest clothes and placed on plush satin lining and soft pillows. It is sent on its way accompanied with items cherished in life such as rings and family pictures. It is sacredly and silently interred in a cemetery, which is expertly manicured, surrounded by flowers, gates, and guards. The dead are surrendered to the “perpetual care” of the Lord in a professionally maintained and landscaped cemetery where no children play and no visitors disturb them.

This concern for sending one’s deceased loved ones to the world of the dead with dignity and elegance reveals a desire to ensure their comfort in the afterlife. But, is there life after death? Are the dead conscious or unconscious? If conscious, are they able to communicate with the living? Are they enjoying the bliss of paradise or the torments of hell? This chapter seeks to answer these questions by investigating the biblical view of death and of the state of the dead.

Objectives of This Chapter

This chapter continues our investigation of the biblical view of human nature by focusing on two major questions: First, what is the biblical view of death? And, second, what is the condition of the dead during the period between death and the resurrection? This period is commonly known as “the intermediate state.”

This chapter consists of four parts. Part 1 provides a brief description mainly of the Catholic and Protestant views of the afterlife. Both believe in the transition of the saved souls to Paradise and of the unsaved souls to Hell. Protestants reject the Catholic belief in Purgatory.

Part 2 examines the Biblical teaching on the nature of death. Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Or, does the Bible teach that death is the termination of life for the whole person, body and soul? In other words, is death according to the Bible the cessation of life for the whole person or the transition to a new form of life for the immortal part of our being?

Parts 3 and 4 examine the Old and New Testaments teachings regarding the condition of the dead during the period between death

and resurrection. The fundamental question we pursue in the last two parts is this: Do the dead sleep in an unconscious state until the resurrection morning? Or, is the soul of the saved experiencing immediately after death the bliss of paradise while that of the unsaved writhes in the torment of hell?

PART 1 BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

The belief in some form of life after death is common in most Christian and non-Christian religions. The reason, as noted in the previous chapter, is the common belief in the immortality of the soul which presupposes the continuation of the conscious life of the soul after the death of the body. We found this belief to be contrary to the Bible which clearly defines death as the cessation of life for the whole person, body and soul.

For the purpose of this chapter, we briefly mention how three major wings of Christianity view life after death: Roman Catholics, Conservative Protestants, and Liberal Christians.

Roman Catholic View of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory

The Catholic Church teaches that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body and is immediately evaluated in a *Particular Judgment* that determines three possible destinations for the disembodied soul: Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory.

Heaven. The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the souls of a few believers “who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified, live for ever with Christ.”⁵ They are taken immediately to their eternal rewards in Heaven where they enjoy communion with the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the saints, and the angels. “In the glory of heaven the blessed continue joyfully to fulfill God’s will.”⁶

Hell. Hell is the place where those who have died “with grave and unrepentant sins” which have not been wiped clean by church rituals,⁷ will be severely punished without any hope of relief for eternity. As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin, descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell ‘eternal fire.’”⁸

The torment of Hell will last forever without any prospect of relief or mercy, but the level of torture depends on the seriousness of the individual's sin. Like the Catholics, Eastern Orthodox churches believe in Hell, but they teach that the precise form of punishment is not known to us.

The teaching that sinners burn eternally in Hell makes God appear to be an inhumane father who in desperation locks away his rebellious children in a horrible hovel, and then throws away for ever the key. We will say more about the implications of this popular belief in the next chapter.

Purgatory. The Catholic Church teaches that “all those who die in God’s grace and friendship, but [are] still imperfectly purified, . . . after death. . . undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”⁹ The souls in Purgatory are systematically tortured with fire until they have paid the residual temporal punishment for their sins. The more purging is necessary, the longer a soul must suffer in Purgatory.¹⁰ This is a type of time-limited Hell during which they become fully cleansed and acceptable for admission to heaven.

As stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “the Church commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead.”¹¹ This means that friends and family members can shorten the stay of their loved ones in Purgatory by paying for masses and prayers, buying indulgences, and making pilgrimages to holy shrines.

The beliefs of the Eastern Orthodox Churches very closely parallel those of the Roman Catholic Church about Heaven and Hell; however, they have no formal belief about purgatory.

Conservative Protestants’ View of Heaven and Hell

We noted in chapter 2 that the Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitions about the afterlife in Purgatory. The Reformers rejected as unbiblical and unreasonable the practice of buying and selling indulgences to reduce the stay of the souls of departed relatives in Purgatory. However, they continued to believe that the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven, while those of the unbelievers suffer the torments of hell. At the resurrection, the body is reunited with the soul, thus intensifying the pleasure of paradise or the pain of hell. Since that time, belief in heaven and hell has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.¹²

For example, the Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of (Calvinistic) Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: “The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received unto the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies: and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.”¹³ The confession continues declaring the belief in purgatory as unbiblical.

Most conservative Protestants believe that there are *only* two possible destinations for the soul after death. One either passes immediately into the glories of Heaven and the presence of God, or else one is sent straight to the flames of Hell for eternal punishment with no possibility of reprieve. Any other destination for the soul, such as the Catholic Purgatory, is merely an “invented” doctrine.

Heaven. Heaven is reserved for those who have been justified by faith in Christ’s saving work. The souls of believers ascend immediately after death to heaven to live in the presence of Christ while awaiting the resurrection of their bodies. At the final resurrection, the disembodied souls will receive new incorruptible bodies and will live in the presence of Jesus Christ in the new earth where there is an absence of pain, disease, sexual activity, and depression.

Hell. Conservative Evangelicals believe that at death the souls of those who have rejected Christ will be sent to Hell, a place of torment and eternal separation from God. Views vary on what punishments Hell may hold beyond isolation from God.

Liberal Protestants’ View of Heaven and Hell

In general, liberal Protestants believe that at death people go to either Heaven to live in the presence of God, or to Hell to experience separation from God. But liberal Protestants hold to a wide range of non-traditional views. For example, some define heaven as the triumph of self-giving, not as a new heaven and a new earth. “Heaven is cordial, honest, loving relationships,” says Dean Lloyd Kalland of Gordon Divinity School in Wenham, Mass.¹⁴

Conversely, to most liberal theologians, Hell is alienation from God. “Hell is estrangement, isolation, despair,” says Dean Lloyd Kalland.¹⁵ In his *Principles of Christian Theology*, Dr. John Macquarrie of Union Theological Seminary describes hell as “not some external or arbitrary punishment that gets assigned for sin, but simply the working out of sin itself, as it destroys the distinctively personal being of the sinner.”¹⁶

Afterlife in Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism

Space does not permit mention of the views of afterlife held by Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Suffice it to say that all of them share a belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body. In Hinduism, for example, the ultimate goal is Moksha, that is, the self-realization and release of the soul from the cycle of death and rebirth. When Moksha is achieved, the soul becomes one with God.

The preceding brief description of the major Catholic and Protestant views of life after death shows that these popular views stem from two assumptions: 1) Death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. 2) The soul is an independent, immaterial, and immortal component that survives the death of the body.

Are these assumptions biblically correct? Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Does the soul survive the death of the body and continue to exist in the bliss of Paradise or torment of Hell? To these questions we must now turn our attention by examining the biblical view of death.

PART 2 THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF DEATH

To understand the Biblical view of death, we need to go back to the account of creation where death is presented not as a natural process willed by God, but as something unnaturally opposed to God. The Genesis narrative teaches us that death came into the world as a result of sin. God commanded Adam not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and added the warning: “In the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). The fact that Adam and Eve did not die on the day of their transgression has led some to conclude that human beings do not actually die because they have a conscious soul that survives the death of the body.

Sin and Death

This allegorical interpretation can hardly be supported by the text which, literally translated, reads: “dying you shall die.” What God simply meant is that on the day they disobeyed, the dying process would begin. From a state in which it was possible for them not to die (conditional immortality), they passed into a state in which it was impossible for them not to die (unconditional mortality).

Prior to the Fall the assurance of immortality was maintained by the tree of life. After the Fall, Adam and Eve no longer had access to the tree of life (Gen 3:22-23) and, consequently, began experiencing the reality of the dying process. In the prophetic vision of the New Earth, the tree of life is found on both sides of the river as a symbol of the gift of eternal life bestowed upon the redeemed (Rev 21:2).

The divine pronouncement found in Genesis 2:17 establishes a clear connection between human death and the transgression of God’s commandment. Thus, life and death in the Bible have religious and ethical significance because they are dependent upon human obedience or disobedience to God. This is a fundamental teaching of the Bible, namely, that death came into this world as a result of human disobedience (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21). This does not diminish the responsibility of the individual for his participation in sin (Ez 18:4, 20). The Bible, however, makes a distinction between the first death, which every human being experiences as a result of Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21), and the second death experienced after the resurrection (Rev 20:6) as the wages for sins personally committed (Rom 6:23).

Death as the Separation of the Soul from the Body

A major question we must address at this point is the Biblical view of the nature of death. To be specific: Is death the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body so that when the body dies the soul lives on? Or, is death the cessation of the existence of the whole person, body and soul?

Historically, Christians have been taught that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body so that the soul survives the body in a disembodied state. The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul.”¹⁷ Augustus Strong defines death in similar terms

in his well-known *Systematic Theology*: “Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body. We distinguish it from spiritual death, or the separation of the soul from God.”¹⁸

Massive Attack by Modern Scholars

The above historical view of the nature of death as the separation of the soul from the body has come under a massive attack by many modern scholars. A few examples suffice to illustrate this point. Lutheran theologian Paul Althaus writes: “Death is more than a departure of the soul from the body. The person, body and soul, is involved in death. . . . The Christian faith knows nothing about an immortality of the personality. . . . It knows only an awakening from real death through the power of God. There is existence after death only by an awakening of the resurrection of the whole person.”¹⁹

Althaus argues that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul does not do justice to the seriousness of death, since the soul passes through death unscathed.²⁰ Moreover, the notion that a person can be totally happy and blessed without the body denies the significance of the body and empties the resurrection of its meaning.²¹ If believers are already blessed in heaven and the wicked are already tormented in hell, why is the final judgment still necessary?²² Althaus concludes that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul rips apart what belongs together: the body and the soul, the destiny of the individual and that of the world.²³

Roman Catholic Theologian Peter Riga of California’s St. Mary’s College acknowledges that the old idea of a soul that departs from the body at death “makes no sense at all.” He continues: “There is just man, man in God’s image and likeness. Man in his totality was created and will be saved.”²⁴

This challenge by modern scholarship to the traditional view of death as the separation of the soul from the body has been long overdue. It is hard to believe that for most of its history Christianity, by and large, has held to a view of human death and destiny which has been largely influenced by Greek thought rather than by the teachings of Scripture.

What is even more surprising is that no amount of Biblical scholarship will change the traditional doctrines held by most churches on the intermediate state. The reason is simple: While individual scholars can and will change their doctrinal views without suffering devastating consequences, the same is not true for well-established churches. A church that introduces radical changes in its historical doctrinal beliefs undermines the faith of its members and thus the stability of the institution.

Death as Cessation of Life

When we search the Bible for a description of the nature of death, we find many clear statements that need little or no interpretation. In the first place, Scripture describes death as a return to the elements from which man originally was made. In pronouncing sentence upon Adam after his disobedience, God said: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for . . . you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). This graphic statement tells us that death is not the separation of the soul from the body, but the termination of one’s life which results in the decay and decomposition of the body. Since man is created of perishable matter, his natural condition is mortality (Gen 3:19).

A study of the words “to die,” “death,” and “dead” in Hebrew and Greek reveals that death is perceived in the Bible as the termination or cessation of life. The ordinary Hebrew word meaning “to die” is *muth*, which occurs in the Old Testament over 800 times. In the vast majority of cases, *muth* is used in the simple sense of the death of men and animals. There is no hint in its usage of any distinction between the two. A clear example is found in Ecclesiastes 3:19 which says “For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other.”

Old Testament Descriptions of Death

The Hebrew noun *maveth*, which is used in the Old Testament about 150 times and is generally translated “death,” offers us three important insights about the nature of death.

First, there is no remembrance of the Lord in death: “For in death [*maveth*] there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?” (Ps 6:5). The reason for no remembrance in death is simply because the thinking process stops when the body with its brain dies. “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that day his thoughts perish” (Ps 146:4). Since at death the “thoughts perish,” it is evident that no conscious soul survives the death of the body. If the thinking process, which is generally associated with the soul, survived the death of the body, then the thoughts of the saints would not perish. They would be able to remember God. But the fact is that “the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (Eccl 9:5).

Second, no praise of God is possible in death or in the grave. “What profit is there in my death [*maveth*], if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?” (Ps 30:9). By comparing

death with dust, the Psalmist clearly shows that there is no consciousness in death because dust cannot think. The same thought is expressed in Psalm 115:17: “The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence.” Here the Psalmist describes death as a state of “silence.” What a contrast with the “noisy” popular opinion of the afterlife where the saints praise God in Heaven and the wicked cry in agony in Hell!

Third, death is described as a “sleep.” “Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death” (Ps 13:3). This characterization of death as “sleep” occurs frequently in the Old and New Testaments because it fittingly represents the state of unconsciousness in death. Shortly we will examine the significance of the “sleep” metaphor for understanding the nature of death.

In several places, *maveth* [death] is used with reference to the second death. “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ez 33:11; cf. 18:23, 32). Here “the death of the wicked” is evidently not the natural death that every person experiences, but the death inflicted by God on impenitent sinners at the end of time. None of the literal descriptions or figurative references to death in the Old Testament suggests the conscious survival of the soul or spirit apart from the body. Death is the cessation of life for the total person.

New Testament References to Death

The New Testament references to “death,” a term rendered by the Greek *thanatos*, are not as informative regarding the nature of death as those found in the Old Testament. The reason is partly due to the fact that in the Old Testament many of the references to death are found in the poetic or wisdom books of Psalms, Job, and Ecclesiastes. This kind of literature is absent in the New Testament. More important is the fact that death is seen in the New Testament from the perspective of Christ’s victory over death. This is a dominant theme in the New Testament which conditions the Christian view of death.

Through His victory over death, Christ has neutralized the sting of death (1 Cor 15:55); He has abolished death (2 Tim 1:10); He has overcome the devil who had power over death (Heb 2:14); He has in His hand the keys of the kingdom of death (Rev 1:18); He is the head of a new humanity as the first-born from the dead (Col 1:18); He causes believers to be born anew to a living hope through His resurrection from the dead (1 Pet 1:3).

Christ's victory over death affects the believer's understanding of physical, spiritual, and eternal death. The believer can face physical death with the confidence that Christ has swallowed up death in victory and will awaken the sleeping saints at His coming (1 Cor 15:51-56).

Believers who were spiritually "dead through trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1; cf. 4:17-19; Matt 8:22) have been regenerated into a new life in Christ (Eph 4:24). Unbelievers who remain spiritually dead throughout their lives and do not accept Christ's provision for their salvation (John 8:21, 24), will experience the second death (Rev 20:6; 21:8) on the Day of Judgment. This is the final, eternal death from which there is no return.

The figurative meanings of the word *thanatos*—death depend entirely on the literal meaning as cessation of life. To argue for the conscious existence of the soul on the basis of a figurative meaning of death is to attribute to the word a meaning which is foreign to it. This runs contrary to language and grammar rules and destroys the connections among physical, spiritual, and eternal death.

Death as Sleep in the Old Testament

In both the Old and New Testaments, death is often called "sleep." Before attempting to explain the reason for the Biblical use of the metaphor of "sleep" for death, let us look at a few examples. In the Old Testament, three Hebrew words meaning "sleep" are used to describe death.

The most common word, *shachav*, is used in the frequently occurring expression so-and-so "slept with his fathers" (Gen 28:11; Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12; 1 Kings 2:10). Beginning with its initial application to Moses ("Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers" – Deut 31:16), and then to David ("Thou shall sleep with thy fathers" – 2 Sam 7:12, KJV), and Job ("Now I shall sleep in the dust" – Job 7:21, KJV), we find this beautiful euphemism for death running like an unbroken thread throughout the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter's statement that "the fathers fell asleep" (2 Pet 3:4). If the souls of the "fathers" were alive in Paradise, then Bible writers could not have regularly spoken of them as being "asleep."

Another Hebrew word for "sleep" is *yashen*. This word occurs both as a verb, "to sleep" (Jer 51:39, 57; Ps 13:3) and as a noun, "sleep." The latter is found in the well-known verse of Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Notice that in this passage both the godly and ungodly are sleeping in the dust of the earth and both will be resurrected at the End.

A third Hebrew word used for the sleep of death is *shenah*. Job asks this rhetorical question: “But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?” (Job 14:10). His answer is: “As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep [*shenah*]” (Job 14:11-12; cf. Ps 76:5; 90:5). Here is a graphic description of death. When a person takes the last breath, “where is he?” that is, “what is left of him?” Nothing. He does not exist any more. He becomes like a lake or river whose water has dried up. He sleeps in the grave and “will not awake” till the end of the world.

One wonders, would Job have given us such a negative description of death if he believed that his soul would survive death? If death introduced Job’s soul into the immediate presence of God in heaven, why does he speak of waiting “till the heavens are no more” (Job 14:12) and “till my release should come” (Job 14:14)? It is evident that neither Job nor any other Old Testament believer knew of a conscious existence after death.

Death as Sleep in the New Testament

Death is described as sleep in the New Testament more frequently than in the Old. The hope of the resurrection, which is clarified and strengthened by Christ’s resurrection, gives new meaning to the sleep of death from which believers will awaken at Christ’s coming. As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection.

Two Greek words meaning “sleep” are used in the New Testament. The first is *koimao* which is used fourteen times for the sleep of death. A derivative of this Greek noun is *koimeeteerion*, from which comes our word *cemetery*. The second Greek word is *katheudein*, which is generally used for ordinary sleep. In the New Testament it is used four times for the sleep of death (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 4:14).

At the time of Christ’s crucifixion, “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep [*kekoimemenon*] were raised” (Matt 27:52). In the original, the text reads: “Many bodies of the sleeping saints were raised.” No comment about their souls being reunited with their bodies is made. It is evident that the whole persons were resurrected and not just the bodies. Speaking figuratively of Lazarus’ death, Jesus said: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [*kekoimetai*], but I go to awake him out of sleep” (John

11:11). When Jesus perceived that He was misunderstood, He “told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead’” (John 11:14). Then Jesus hastened to reassure Martha: “Your brother will rise again” (John 11:23).

This episode is significant, first of all, because Jesus plainly describes death as a “sleep” from which the dead will awaken at the sound of His voice. Lazarus’ condition in death was similar to a sleep from which one awakens. Christ said: “I go to awake him out of sleep” (John 11:11). The Lord carried out His promise by going to the tomb to awaken Lazarus by calling: “‘Lazarus, come out.’ And the dead man came out” (John 11:43-44).

The *awakening* of Lazarus out of the sleep of death by the sound of Christ’s voice parallels the awakening of the sleeping saints on the day of His glorious coming. They, too, shall hear the voice of Christ and come forth to life again. “The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs *will hear his voice* and come forth” (John 5:28; cf. John 5:25). “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a *shout*, with the *voice* of the archangel, . . . And the dead in Christ will rise first” (1 Thess 4:16).

There is harmony and symmetry in the expressions “sleeping” and “awakening” as used in the Bible for going into and coming out of a death state. The two expressions corroborate the notion that death is an unconscious state like sleeping from which believers will awake on the day of Christ’s coming.

Lazarus Had No Afterlife Experience

Lazarus’ experience is significant because he spent four days in the grave. This was not a near-death experience, but a real death experience. If, as popularly believed, the soul at death leaves the body and goes to heaven, then Lazarus would have had an amazing experience to share about the four days he would have spent in paradise. The religious leaders and the people would have done all in their power to elicit from Lazarus as much information as possible about the unseen world. Such information would have provided valuable answers to the question of life after death which was so hotly debated among the Sadducees and Pharisees (Matt 22:23, 28; Mark 12:18, 23; Luke 20:27, 33).

But Lazarus had nothing to share about life after death, because during the four days he spent in the tomb he slept the unconscious sleep of death. What is true of Lazarus is also true of six other persons who were raised from the dead: The widow’s son (1 Kings 17:17-24); the Shunammite’s son (2 Kings 4:18-37); the widow’s son at Nain (Luke

7:11-15); the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:41, 42, 49-56); Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41); and Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). Each of these persons came out of death as if it were out of a profound sleep, with their original feelings and individuality, but with no afterlife experience to share.

The Bible does not even hint that the soul of Lazarus, or of the other six persons raised from the dead, had gone to heaven. None of them shared having had a “heavenly experience” because none of them had ascended to heaven. This is confirmed by Peter’s reference to David in his speech on the day of Pentecost: “Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is still with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). Some could argue that what was in the grave was David’s body, not his soul which had gone to heaven. But this interpretation is negated by Peter’s explicit words: “For *David did not ascend into the heavens*” (Acts 2:34). The Knox translation renders it, “*David never went up to heaven.*” The Cambridge Bible has the following note: “*For David is not ascended. Better ascended not. He went down to the grave and ‘slept with his fathers.’*” What sleeps in the grave, according to the Bible, is not merely the body but the whole person who awaits the resurrection awakening.

Paul and the Sleeping Saints

In the two great chapters on the resurrection in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, Paul repeatedly speaks of those who have fallen “asleep” in Christ (1 Thess 4:13, 14, 15; 1 Cor 15:6, 18, 20). A look at some of Paul’s statements sheds light on what Paul meant by characterizing death as sleep.

In writing to the Thessalonians, who were grieving over their loved ones who had fallen asleep before experiencing the coming of Christ, Paul reassures them that as God raised Jesus from the dead, so He will through Christ “bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:14). Some maintain that Paul is speaking here of disembodied souls which allegedly ascended to heaven at death and which will return with Christ when He descends to this earth at His return.

This interpretation ignores three major points. First, the Bible nowhere teaches that the soul at death ascends to heaven. Second, in the context, Paul is not speaking of immortal souls but of “those who are asleep” (1 Thess 4:13; cf. v. 14) and of “the dead in Christ” (1 Thess 4:16). “The dead in Christ will *rise* first” from their graves (1 Thess 4:16) and will not descend from heaven. There is no hint that the bodies *rise* from the

graves and the souls *descend* from heaven to be reunited with the bodies. Such a dualistic notion is foreign to the Bible.

Third, if Paul really believed that “the dead in Christ” were not really dead in the grave but alive in heaven as disembodied souls, he would have capitalized on their blissful condition in heaven to explain to the Thessalonians that their grieving was senseless. Why should they grieve for their loved ones if they were already enjoying the bliss of heaven? The reason Paul did not give such an encouragement is obviously because he knew that sleeping saints were not in heaven but in their graves.

This conclusion is consistent with the assurance Paul gave to his readers that living Christians would not meet Christ at His coming prior to those who had fallen asleep. “We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:15). The reason is that “the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:16-17).

The fact that the living saints will meet with Christ at the same time as the sleeping saints indicates that the latter have not yet been united with Christ in heaven. If the souls of the sleeping saints were already enjoying fellowship with Christ in heaven and were to descend with Christ to earth at His second Advent, then obviously they would have an unmistakable priority over the living saints. But the truth is that both sleeping and living believers are awaiting their longed-for union with the Savior, a union which both will experience at the same time on the day of Christ’s coming.

Paul’s discussion of the sleeping saints in 1 Corinthians 15 confirms much of what we have already found in 1 Thessalonians 4. After affirming the fundamental importance of Christ’s resurrection for the Christian faith and hope, Paul explains that “if Christ had not been raised . . . Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor 15:18-19). Paul could hardly have said that the sleeping saints would have perished without the guarantee of Christ’s resurrection if he believed that their souls were immortal and were already enjoying the bliss of Paradise. If Paul believed souls are immortal, he probably would have said that without Christ’s resurrection the souls of the sleeping saints would remain disembodied for all eternity. But Paul makes no allusion to such a possibility because he believed that the whole person, body and soul, would have “perished” without the guarantee of Christ’s resurrection.

It is notable that in the whole chapter which is devoted to the importance and dynamics of the resurrection, Paul never hints at the alleged reunification of the body with the soul at the resurrection. If Paul had

held such a belief, he hardly could have avoided making some reference to the reattachment of the body to the soul, especially in his discussions of the transformation of the believers from a mortal to an immortal state at Christ's coming. But the only "mystery" that Paul reveals is that "we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (1 Cor 15:51). This change from a perishable to an imperishable nature occurs for all, living and dead, at the same time, namely, at the sounding of "the last trumpet" (1 Cor 15:52). The change has nothing to do with disembodied souls regaining possession of their resurrected bodies. Rather, it is a change from mortal to immortal life for both the living and the dead in Christ: "The mortal puts on immortality" (1 Cor 15:54).

The Significance of the "Sleep" Metaphor

The frequent Bible use of the "sleep" metaphor to describe the state of the dead in Christ raises the question of its implications about the nature of death. Specifically, why is this metaphor used and what insights can we legitimately derive from it about the nature of death? There are three major reasons for the use of the "sleep" metaphor in the Bible.

First, there is a similarity between the "sleep" of the dead and the "sleep" of the living. Both are characterized by a condition of unconsciousness and inactivity which is interrupted by an awakening. Thus, the "sleep" metaphor fittingly represents the unconscious state of the dead and their awakening on the day of Christ's return.

Second the use of the "sleep" metaphor inspires hope, assuring us of a later awakening. As a person goes to sleep at night in the hope of awakening in the morning, so the believer falls asleep in the Lord in the assurance of being awakened by Christ on resurrection morning.

When we hear or say that a person is dead, we automatically think that there is no more hope of bringing him/her back to life. But when we say that a person is sleeping in the Lord, we express hope for his or her restoration to life on the day of the resurrection. The "sleep" metaphor does not describe the sleeping condition of the dead, but the possibility of being awakened to live again on Resurrection morning.

Third, the use of the "sleep" metaphor is suggested by the fact that there is no consciousness of the elapse of time in sleep. Thus, the metaphor provides a fitting representation of the unconscious state of the deceased between death and resurrection. They have no awareness of the passing of time. In his early writings, Martin Luther expressed this thought in a most graphic way: "Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning

unexpected when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, so shall we suddenly rise on the last day without knowing how we have come into death and through death.”²⁵ Again Luther wrote: “We shall sleep until He comes and knocks on the little grave and says, Doctor Martin, get up! Then I shall rise in a moment and be happy with Him forever.”²⁶

For the sake of historical accuracy, it must be pointed out that later in life Luther largely rejected the idea of the unconscious sleep of the dead, apparently because of Calvin’s strong attack against this doctrine. In his *Commentary on Genesis*, which he wrote in 1537, Luther remarks: “The departed soul does not sleep in this manner [regular sleep]; it is, more properly speaking, awake and has vision and conversation with the angels and God.”²⁷ The change in Luther’s position from the unconscious to the conscious state of the dead only serves to show that even influential reformers were not exempted from the religious pressures of their time.

Our study of the “sleep” metaphor in the Old and New Testaments has shown that the Bible uses the “sleep” metaphor frequently because it enshrines a vital truth, namely, the dead who sleep in Christ are unconscious of any lapse of time until their resurrection. The believer who dies in Christ falls asleep and rests, unconscious, until he awakes when Christ calls him back to life at His coming.

The Meaning and Ground of Immortality

Immortality in the Bible is not an innate human possession but a divine attribute. The term “immortality” comes from the Greek *athanasia*, which means “deathlessness,” and thus unending existence. This term occurs only twice; first in connection with God “who alone has immortality” (1 Tim 6:16), and second in relation to human mortality which must put on immortality (1 Cor 15:53) at the time of the resurrection. The latter reference refutes the notion of a natural immortality of the soul because it says that immortality is something that the resurrected saints will “put on.” It is not something that they already possess.

The Bible never suggests that immortality is a natural quality or right of human beings. The presence of the “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden shows that Adam’s immortality depended on his eating the fruit of the tree of life. Scripture teaches that “immortality is to be *sought* (Rom 2:7) and “put on” (1 Cor 15:53). It is, like ‘eternal life,’ the *gift* of God (Rom 6:23) to be *inherited* (Matt 19:29) by *knowing* God (John 17:3) *through Christ* (John 14:19; 17:2; Rom 6:23). In Paul’s view immortality is tied solely to the resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15) as the ground and pledge of

the believer's hope. Those who insist on looking for the philosophical idea of natural immortality of the soul in the Bible, ignore God's Word and corrupt the biblical faith with Greek dualistic ideas.

Conclusion

Our study of the Biblical view of the nature of death has shown that both the Old and New Testaments explicitly teach that death is the *extinction of life* for the whole person. No remembrance or consciousness exists in death (Ps 8:5; 146:4; 30:9; 115:17; Ecc 9:5). The spirit or soul does not exist apart from the body. Death is the loss of the *total being* and not merely the loss of *well-being*. The whole person rests in the grave in a state of unconsciousness characterized in the Bible as "sleep." The "awakening" will take place at Christ's coming when He will call back to life the sleeping saints. The "sleep" metaphor is truly a beautiful and tender and comforting expression which intimates that death is not the *final* human destiny because there will be an awakening out of the sleep of death on resurrection morning.

PART 3 *SHEOL* IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Two words are used in the Bible to describe the dwelling place of the dead. The two words are *sheol* in the Old Testament and *hades* in the New Testament. They often are frequently misinterpreted to represent the place where disembodied souls continue to exist after death and the place of punishment of the ungodly (hell). Thus, it is imperative for us to study the Biblical meaning and usage of these two terms.

Translations and Interpretations of *Sheol*

The Hebrew word *sheol*, which occurs 65 times in the Old Testament, is translated variously as "grave," "hell," "pit," or "death." These variant translations make it difficult for the English reader to understand the basic meaning of *sheol*. *The King James Version* (KJV) renders *sheol* "grave" 31 times, "hell" 31 times, and "pit" 3 times. This means that readers of the KJV are often misled to believe that the Old Testament teaches the existence of a hell where the wicked are tormented for their sins.

For example, in the KJV, Psalm 16:10 reads: "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell." An uninformed reader will assume that the text

means, “For thou wilt not leave my soul to be tormented in hell.” Such a reading is an obvious misinterpretation of the text which simply says, as rendered in the RSV, “For thou doest not give me up to Sheol,” that is, the grave. The Psalmist here expresses confidence that God will not abandon him in the grave. In fact, the text is applied this way in Acts 2:27 to Christ who was not left in the grave by the Father. The text has nothing to say about a place of torment.

To avoid such misleading interpretations, the *Revised Standard Version* and *The New American Standard Bible* simply transliterate the Hebrew word into English letters as *sheol*. *The New International Version* usually translates it as “grave” (occasionally as “death”), with a footnote “*sheol*.” This translation accurately reflects the basic meaning of *sheol* as the grave or, even better, the collective place of the dead.

Different translations often reflect the different religious beliefs of the translators. The translators of the KJV believed that at death the righteous go to Heaven and the wicked to hell; consequently, they translated *sheol* “grave” when referring to the righteous, whose bodies rested in the grave, and “hell” when referring to the wicked whose souls are supposedly tormented in hell. A similar approach has been adopted by Old Testament scholar Alexander Heidel,²⁸ who has been criticized for arbitrarily handling the Biblical data.²⁹

These interpretations of *sheol* as the dwelling place of souls (rather than the resting place of the body in the grave) or the place of punishment for the wicked, known as hell, do not stand up under the light of the Biblical usage of *sheol*. This fact is recognized even by John W. Cooper who has attempted to defend the dualistic view of human nature from the massive attacks of modern scholarship against it. In his book *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, Cooper states: “Perhaps most interesting for traditional Christians to note is the fact that it [*sheol*] is the resting place of the dead irrespective of their religion during life. *Sheol* is not the ‘hell’ to which the wicked are condemned and from which the Lord’s faithful are spared in glory. . . . There is no doubt that believers and unbelievers all were thought to go to *sheol* when they die.”³⁰

The liberal *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* states even more emphatically that “Nowhere in the Old Testament is the abode of the dead [*sheol*] regarded as a place of punishment or torment. The concept of an infernal ‘hell’ developed in Israel only during the Hellenistic period.”³¹

In his classic study on *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, Johannes Pedersen flatly states: “*Sheol* is the entirety into which all graves are merged; . . . Where there is grave, there is *sheol*, and where there is

sheol, there is grave.”³² Pedersen explains at great length that *sheol* is the collective place of the dead where all the deceased go, whether buried or unburied. This conclusion becomes self-evident when we look at some usages of *sheol*.

Etymology and Location of *Sheol*

The etymology of *sheol* is uncertain. The derivations most frequently mentioned are from such root meanings as “to ask,” “to inquire,” and “to bury one’s self.”³³ In his dissertation on “Sheol in the Old Testament,” Ralph Doermann proposed a derivation from the stem *shilah*, which has the primary meaning “to be quiet,” “at ease.” He concludes that “if a connection between *sheol* and *shilah* is feasible, it would appear that the name is not connected with the location of the realm of the dead, but rather with the character of its occupants who are primarily ‘at rest.’”³⁴ The difference between the two words is relative. More important is the fact that *sheol* denotes a place where the dead are at rest.

Sheol is located deep beneath the surface of the earth because it is often mentioned in connection with heaven to denote the uttermost limits of the universe. *Sheol* is the deepest place in the universe, just as the heaven is the highest. Amos describes the inescapable wrath of God in these terms: “Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down” (Amos 9:2-3). Similarly, the Psalmist exclaims: “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou are there!” (Ps 139:7-8; cf. Job 11:7-9).

Being situated beneath the earth, the dead reach *sheol* by “going down,” a euphemism for being buried in the earth. Thus, when Jacob was informed of the death of his son Joseph, he said: “I shall go down to Sheol to my son mourning” (Gen 37:35). Perhaps the clearest example of the location of *sheol* beneath the earth is the account of the punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who had revolted against the authority of Moses. “The ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their household and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them” (Num 16:31-33). This episode clearly shows that the whole person, and not just the soul, goes down to *sheol*, to the realm of the dead.

Characteristics of *Sheol*

The characteristics of *sheol* are essentially those of the realm of the dead, or the grave. In numerous passages, *sheol* is found in parallelism with the Hebrew word *bor*, which denotes “a pit” or any kind of subterranean hole such as a grave. For example, the Psalmist writes: “For my soul is full of troubles and my life draws near to Sheol. I am reckoned among those who go down to the Pit [*bor*]” (Ps 88:3-4).³⁵ Here the parallelism identifies *sheol* with the pit, that is, the burial place of the dead.

Several times *Sheol* appears together with *abaddon*, which means “destruction,” or “ruin.”³⁶ *Abaddon* appears in parallelism with the grave: “Is thy covenant loyalty declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon” (Ps 88:12). The fact that *sheol* is associated with *abaddon*, the place of destruction, shows that the realm of the dead was seen as the place of destruction, and not as the place of eternal suffering for the wicked.

Sheol is also characterized as “the land of darkness and deep darkness” (Job 10:21) where the dead never see light again (Ps 49:20; 88:13). It is also “the land of silence” (Ps 94:17; cf. 115:17) and the land of no-return: “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more” (Job 7:10).

Sheol as the Realm of the Dead

All the above characteristics of *sheol* describe accurately the realm of the dead. The pit, the place of destruction, the land of darkness, the land of silence, the land of no-return are all descriptive of the realm of the dead. Furthermore we have some instances where *sheol* occurs in parallelism with death and the grave: “Let death come upon them; let them go down to Sheol alive; let them go away in terror to their grave” (Ps 55:16). By virtue of the parallelism, here *sheol* is identified with death and the grave.

The various figures used to describe *sheol* all serve to show that it is not the locality of departed spirits, but *the realm of the dead*. Anthony Hoekema, a Calvinistic scholar, reaches essentially the same conclusion in his book *The Bible and the Future*. He writes: “The various figures which are applied to *sheol* can all be understood as referring to the realm of the dead: *Sheol* is said to have bars (Job 17:16), to be a dark and gloomy place (Job 17:13), to be a monster with insatiable appetite (Prov 27:20;

30:15-16; Is 5:14; Hab 2:5). When we think of *sheol* in this way, we must remember that both the godly and the ungodly go down into *sheol* at death, since both enter the realm of the dead.”³⁷

Any attempt to turn *sheol* into the place of tormenting the wicked or into the abode of spirits/souls clearly contradicts the Biblical description of *sheol* as the underground depository of the dead.

The Condition of the Dead in *Sheol*

Since death is the termination of life and vitality, the state of the dead in *sheol* is described in terms opposite to the idea of life on earth. Life means vitality and activity; death means silence and inactivity. This is true for all, the righteous and the wicked. “One fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean” (Eccl 9:2). They all go to the same place, *sheol*, the realm of the dead.

Solomon offers a graphic description of the condition of the dead in *sheol*: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in *Sheol*, to which you are going” (Eccl 9:10). It is evident that *sheol*, the realm of the dead, is the place of unconscious non-existence. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more for ever any share in all that is done under the sun” (Eccl 9:5-6). The main argument here is that death puts an abrupt end to all activity “under the sun,” and what follows death is *sheol*, the realm of the dead where there is a state of inactivity, without knowledge or consciousness. The Bible describes such a state as “sleep.”

The phrase “and he slept with his fathers” (cf. 1 Kings 1:21; 2:10; 11:43) reflects the idea that the dead join their predecessors in *sheol* in a somnolent, unconscious state. The idea of rest or sleep in *sheol* is prominent in Job who cries in the midst of his sufferings: “Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? . . . For then I should have lain down and been quiet; I should have slept; then I should have been at rest. . . . There the wicked cease from troubling and there the weary are at rest” (Job 3:11,13, 17).

Rest in *sheol* is neither the rest of souls enjoying the bliss of paradise nor the torments of hell, but the rest of dead bodies sleeping in their dusty, worm-covered graves. “If I wait for the grave [*sheol*] as my house, if I make my bed in the darkness, if I say to corruption, ‘You are my father,’

and to the worm, ‘you are my mother and my sister,’ where then is my hope? . . . Will they go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we rest together in the dust?” (Job 17:13-16, NKJV).

The dead sleep in *sheol* until the End. “A man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep” (Job 14:12). “Till the heavens are no more” is possibly an allusion to the coming of the Lord at the end of time to resurrect the saints. In all his trials, Job never gave up his hope of seeing the Lord even after the decay of his body. “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27; NKJV).

In summation, the condition of the dead in *sheol*, the realm of the dead, is one of unconscious inactivity, a rest or sleep that will continue until the day of the resurrection. None of the texts we have examined suggests that *sheol* is the place of punishment for the ungodly (hell) or a place of conscious existence for the souls or spirits of the dead. As N. H. Snaith flatly states it: “A dead body, whether of man or bird or beast, is without *nepshesh* [soul]. In *sheol*, the abode of the dead, there is no *nepshesh* [soul].”³⁸ No souls are in *sheol* simply because in the Old Testament the soul does not survive the death of the body.

PART 3 HADES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament says very little about the state of the dead during the intermediate period between their falling asleep and their awakening on the day of the resurrection. The primary concern of the New Testament is with the events that mark the transition from this age to the age to come: the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

Our major source of information for the New Testament view of the state of the dead are the eleven references to *hades* (which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*) and five passages commonly cited in support of the belief in the conscious existence of the soul after death. The five passages are (1) Luke 16:19-31, where we find the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus; (2) Luke 23:42-43, which reports the conversation between Jesus and the thief on the cross; (3) Philippians 1:23, where Paul speaks of his “desire to depart and be with Christ”; (4) 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, where Paul uses the imagery of the earthly/heavenly

houses and of the unclothed/clothed conditions to express his desire to “be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8); and (5) Revelation 6:9-11 which mentions the souls of the martyrs under the altar crying to God to avenge their blood. We proceed to examine each of the above in the order given.

The Meaning and Nature of *Hades*

The Greek word *hades* came into Biblical use when the translators of the Septuagint (the Greek OT) chose it to render the Hebrew *sheol*. The problem is that *hades* was used in the Greek world in a vastly different way than *sheol*. While *sheol* in the Old Testament is the realm of the dead where, as we have seen, the deceased are in an unconscious state, *hades* in Greek mythology is the underworld where the conscious souls of the dead are divided in two major regions, one a place of torment and the other of blessedness.

Edward Fudge offers this concise description of the Greek conception of *hades*: “In Greek mythology Hades was the god of the underworld, and then the name of the nether world itself. Charon ferried the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx or Acheron into his abode where the watchdog Cerberus guarded the gate so that none might escape. The pagan myth contained all the elements of the medieval eschatology: there was the pleasant Elysium, the gloomy and miserable Tartarus, and even the Plains of Asphodel, where ghosts could wander who were suited for neither of the above. Ruling beside the god was his queen Proserpine (or Persephone), whom he had raped from the world above.”³⁹

This Greek conception of *hades* influenced Hellenistic Jews, during the intertestamental period, to adopt the belief in the immortality of the soul and the idea of a spatial separation in the underworld between the righteous and the godless. The souls of the righteous proceeded immediately after death to heavenly joy, there to await the resurrection, while the souls of the godless went to a place of torment in *hades*.⁴⁰ The popular acceptance of this scenario is reflected in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to be examined shortly.

This Classical Greek view of *hades* as a place of torment for the wicked eventually entered into the Christian Church and influenced even Bible translators. It is noteworthy that the word *hades*, which occurs eleven times in the New Testament, is translated in the KJV ten times as “hell”⁴¹ and one time as “grave.”⁴² The RSV transliterates the word as “Hades.”

The translation of *hades* as “hell” is inaccurate and misleading because, with the exception of Luke 16:23, the term refers to the grave

or the location of the dead, not to a place of punishment. The latter is designated as *gehenna*, a term which also occurs eleven times in the New Testament⁴³ and is rightly translated “hell” since it refers to the lake of fire, the place of doom for the lost. *Hades*, on the other hand, is used in the New Testament as the standing equivalent of *sheol*, the realm of the dead or the grave.

Jesus and *Hades*

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to *hades* three times. The first use of *hades* is found in Matthew 11:23 where Jesus upbraids Capernaum, saying: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades” (cf. Luke 10:15). Here *hades*, like *sheol* in the Old Testament (Amos 9:2-3; Job 11:7-9), denotes the deepest place in the universe, just as heaven is the highest.

The second use of *hades* in the teaching of Jesus occurs in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:23). We shall return to this shortly. The third use is found in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus expresses His confidence that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail” against His church. The meaning of the phrase “the gates of Hades” is illuminated by the use of the same expression in the Old Testament and Jewish literature (3 Macc 5:51; Wis. of Sol 16:13) as a synonym for death. For example, Job asks rhetorically: “Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?” (Job 38:17; cf. Is 38:18). The underworld was pictured as enclosed with cliffs, where the dead were locked in. Thus, what Jesus meant by “the gates of Hades” is that death shall not prevail against His church, obviously because He had gained the victory over death.

Like all the dead, Jesus went to *hades*, that is, to the grave, but unlike the rest He was victorious over death. “For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27; cf. 2:31). Here *hades* is the grave where Christ’s body rested for only three days and, consequently, did not “see corruption,” the decay process resulting from a prolonged interment. Because of His victory over death, *hades*—the grave is a defeated enemy. Thus, Paul exclaims: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave [*hades*] where is thy victory?” (1 Cor 15:55, KJV). Here *hades* is correctly translated “grave” in the KJV since it is parallel with death.

Christ now holds the keys to “death and Hades” (Rev 1:18); He has power over death and the grave. This enables Him to unlock the graves and call forth the saints to everlasting life at His coming. In all these pas-

sages, *hades* is consistently associated with death, because it is the resting place of the dead, the grave. The same is true in Revelation 6:8 where the pale horse has a rider whose name “was Death, and Hades followed him.” The reason “Hades” follows “Death” is obviously because *hades*, as the grave, receives the dead.

At the end of the millennium, “Death and Hades” will give up their dead (Rev 20:13) and “then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire” (Rev 20:14). These two verses are significant. First, because they tell us that eventually *hades* will give up the dead which indicates again that *hades* is the realm of the dead. Second, they inform us that at the End, *hades* itself will be thrown into the lake of fire. By means of this colorful imagery, the Bible reassures us that at the End, both death and the grave will be destroyed. This will be the death of death, or as Revelation puts it, “the second death.”

This brief survey of the use of *hades* in the New Testament clearly shows that its meaning and usage is consistent with that of *sheol* in the Old Testament. Both terms denote the grave or the realm of the dead and not the place of punishment of the ungodly.⁴⁴

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The word *hades* also occurs in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but with a different meaning. While in the ten references we have just examined *hades* refers to the grave or the realm of the dead, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus it denotes the place of punishment for the ungodly (Luke 16:23). The reason for this exceptional use will be explained shortly. Obviously, dualists make great use of this parable to support the notion of the conscious existence of disembodied souls during the intermediate state (Luke 16:19-31). Because of the importance attached to this parable, we need to examine it closely.

First, let us look at the main points of the story. Lazarus and the rich man both die. Their situations in life are now reversed after their death. For when Lazarus died, he “was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22), whereas the rich man was taken to *hades* where he was tormented by scorching flames (Luke 16:23). Although a great gulf separated them, the rich man could see Lazarus in Abraham’s bosom. So he pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus on two errands: first, to “send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool his tongue” (Luke 16:24), and second, to send Lazarus to warn his family members to repent

lest they experience the same punishment. Abraham denied both requests for two reasons. The first, because there was a great chasm that made it impossible for Lazarus to cross over to help him (Luke 16:26); the second, because if his family members did “not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Before looking at the parable, we need to remember that unlike an allegory such as *Pilgrim’s Progress* where every detail carries a meaning, the details of a parable do not necessarily have any significance in themselves except as “props” for the story. A parable is designed to teach a fundamental truth and the details do not necessarily have a literal meaning unless the context indicates otherwise. Out of this principle another grows, namely, only the fundamental teaching of a parable, confirmed by the general tenor of Scripture, may be legitimately used for defining doctrine.

The Problems with a Literal Interpretation

Those who interpret the parable as a literal representation of the state of the saved and unsaved after death are faced with insurmountable problems. If the narrative is an actual description of the intermediate state, then it must be completely true in fact and completely consistent in detail. But if the parable is figurative, then only the moral truth to be conveyed need concern us. A literal interpretation of the narrative breaks down under the weight of its own absurdities and contradictions, as becomes apparent under scrutiny.

Contenders for literalism suppose that the rich man and Lazarus were disembodied spirits, destitute of bodies. Yet the rich man is described as having “eyes” that see and a “tongue” that not only speaks but also seeks relief from the “finger” of Lazarus—all real body parts portrayed as existing physically despite the fact that the rich man’s body was duly buried in the grave. Was his body carried away into *hades* together with his soul by mistake?

A gulf separates Lazarus in Heaven (Abraham’s bosom) from the rich man in *hades*. The gulf is too wide for anyone to cross and yet narrow enough to permit them to converse. Taken literally, this means that Heaven and Hell are within geographical speaking and seeing distance from each other so that saints and sinners can see and communicate with one another eternally. Ponder for a moment the case of parents in Heaven

seeing their children agonizing in *hades* for all eternity. Would not such a sight destroy the very joy and peace of Heaven? It is unthinkable that the saved will see and converse with their unsaved loved ones for all eternity across a dividing gulf.

Conflict with Biblical Truths

A literal interpretation of the parable contradicts certain fundamental Biblical truths. If the narrative is literal, then Lazarus received his reward and the rich man his punishment immediately after death and before the judgment day. But the Bible clearly teaches that the rewards and punishments, as well as the separation between the saved and the unsaved, will take place on the day of Christ's coming: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, . . . and before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another" (Matt 25:31-32). "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay everyone for what he has done" (Rev 22:12). Paul expected to receive "the crown of righteousness" on the day of Christ's appearing (2 Tim 4:8).

A literal interpretation of the parable also contradicts the uniform testimony of the Old and New Testaments that the dead, both righteous and ungodly, lie silent and unconscious in death until the resurrection day (Eccl 9:5-6; Job 14:12-15, 20, 21; Ps 6:5; 115:17). A literal interpretation also contradicts the consistent use of *hades* in the New Testament to denote the grave or the realm of the dead, not a place of punishment. We have found that in ten of its eleven occurrences, *hades* is explicitly connected with death and the grave. The exceptional use of *hades* in this parable as a fiery place of torment (Luke 16:24) derives not from Scripture, but from current Jewish beliefs influenced by Greek mythology.

Current Jewish Concepts

Fortunately for our investigation, we have Jewish writings that illuminate the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Especially revealing is the "Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades," written by Josephus, the famous Jewish historian who lived during New Testament times (died about A. D. 100). His discourse parallels very closely the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus. In it Josephus explains that "Hades is a subterraneous region where the light of this world does not shine. . . . This region is allowed as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them, who distribute to them *temporary punishments*, agreeable to every one's behavior and manners."⁴⁵

Josephus points out, however, that *hades* is divided into two regions. One is “the region of light” where the souls of the righteous dead are brought by angels to the “place we call *The Bosom of Abraham*.”⁴⁶ The second region is in “perpetual darkness,” and the souls of the ungodly are dragged by force “by the angels allotted for punishment.”⁴⁷ These angels drag the ungodly “into the neighborhood of hell itself,” so that they can see and feel the heat of the flames.⁴⁸ But they are not thrown into hell itself until after the final judgment. “A *chaos* deep and large is fixed between them; insomuch that a just man that hath compassion upon them, cannot be admitted, nor can one that is unjust, if he were bold enough to attempt it, pass over it.”⁴⁹

The striking similarities between Josephus’ description of *hades* and the parable of the rich man and Lazarus are self-evident. In both accounts we have the two regions that separate the righteous from the ungodly, the bosom of Abraham as the abode of the righteous, a great gulf that cannot be crossed, and the inhabitants of one region who can see those of the other region.

Josephus’ description of *hades* is not unique. Similar descriptions can be found in other Jewish literature.⁵⁰ What this means is that Jesus capitalized on the popular understanding of the condition of the dead in *hades*, neither to endorse nor refute such views, but to drive home the importance of heeding in this present life the teachings of Moses and the prophets because this determines bliss or misery in the world to come.

Jesus’ Use of Current Beliefs

At this juncture, it may be proper to ask, “Why did Jesus tell a parable based on current beliefs that do not accurately represent truth as set forth elsewhere in the Scripture and in His own teachings?” The answer is that Jesus met people on their own ground, capitalizing on what was familiar to them to teach them vital truths. Many of His hearers had come to believe in a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection, though such a belief is foreign to Scripture. This erroneous belief was adopted during the intertestamental period as part of the process of Hellenization of Judaism and had become a part of Judaism by the time of Jesus.

In this parable, Jesus made use of a popular belief, not to endorse it, but to impress upon the minds of His hearers an important spiritual lesson. It should be noted that even in the preceding parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-12), Jesus uses a story that does not accurately represent Biblical truth. Nowhere, does the Bible endorse the practice

of a dishonest administrator who reduces to half the outstanding debts of creditors in order to get some personal benefits from such creditors. The lesson of the parable is to “make friends for yourselves” (Luke 16:9), not to teach dishonest business practices.

John Cooper, though he has produced in my view the most scholarly defense of the dualistic view of human nature, acknowledges that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus “does not necessarily tell us what Jesus or Luke believed about the afterlife, nor does it provide a firm basis for a doctrine of the intermediate state. For it is possible that Jesus simply uses popular images in order to make his ethical point. He may not have been endorsing those images. He may not have believed them himself because he knew them to be false.”⁵¹

Cooper then asks the question: “What does this passage tell us about the intermediate state?” He flatly and honestly replies: “The answer may be, ‘Nothing.’ The dualist case cannot lean on this text as a main support.”⁵² The reason he gives is that it is most difficult to draw conclusions from the imagery of the parable. For example, Cooper asks: “Will we be bodily beings [in the intermediate state]? Will the blessed and the damned be able to see each other?”⁵³

Jesus and the Thief on the Cross

Dualists use the brief conversation between Jesus and the penitent thief on the cross next to Him (Luke 23:42-43) as a major proof for the conscious existence of the faithful dead in paradise before the resurrection. Thus, it is important to take a close look to the words spoken by Jesus to the penitent thief.

Unlike the other criminal and most of the crowd, the penitent thief did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. He said: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). Jesus answered him, “Truly I say to you today you shall be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). A major problem in the interpretation of this text is caused by the location of the comma, which in most translations, is placed before “today.” Thus, most readers and commentators assume that Jesus said: “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” Such a reading is interpreted to mean that “on that very day”⁵⁴ the thief went to paradise with Christ.

The original Greek text, however, has no punctuation and, translated literally, reads: “Truly to you I say today with me you will be in paradise.” The adverb “today–*semeron*” stands between the verb “I say–*lego*” and “you will be–*ese*.” This means that grammatically the adverb “today” can

apply to either of the two verbs. If it qualifies the first verb, then Jesus said: “Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in paradise.”

Translators have placed the comma before the adverb “today,” not for grammatical reasons, but for the religious doctrine that the dead receive their reward at death. It would be better if translators would limit themselves to translating the text and leave the task of interpretation to the reader.

The question we face is: Did Jesus mean to say, “Truly, I say to you today. . .” or “Today you shall be with me in paradise”? Those who maintain that Jesus meant the latter appeal to the fact that the adverb “today” does not occur elsewhere with the frequently used phrase “Truly, I say to you.” This is a valid observation, but the reason for this exceptional attachment of the adverb “today” to the phrase “Truly, I say to you” could very well be the immediate context. The thief asked Jesus to remember him in the *future* when He would establish His messianic kingdom. But Jesus responded by remembering the penitent thief *immediately*, “today,” and by reassuring him that he would be with Him in paradise. This interpretation is supported by two major considerations: (1) the time when the saved will enter upon their reward in paradise, and (2) the time when Jesus Himself returned to Paradise.

When Will the Redeemed Enter Paradise?

Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught that the redeemed would enter into His Father’s Kingdom at His coming: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34; 16:27). Paul taught the same truth. At Christ’s second coming, the sleeping saints will be resurrected and the living saints translated, and all “shall be caught up together . . . in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17). It is at that time, following the resurrection of the righteous, that the thief will be with Jesus in Paradise.

When Did Jesus Return to Paradise?

Those who interpret Christ’s statement to the thief as meaning that on that very day the thief went to paradise to be with Christ, assume that both Jesus and the thief ascended to heaven immediately after their death. This conclusion is not supported by Scripture.

The Scriptures expressly teach that on the day of His crucifixion, Christ went into the grave—*hades*. At Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that in accordance to David’s prophecy (Ps 16:10), Christ “was not abandoned in Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption,” but he was raised up by God (Acts 2:31-32). *Hades*, as we have seen, is associated consistently in the New Testament with the grave or the realm of the dead. This means that Christ could hardly have told the thief that on that same day he would be with Him in paradise when He knew that on that day He would be resting in the grave.

Those who would argue that only Christ’s body went into the grave while His soul ascended to heaven ignore what Jesus said to Mary on the day of His resurrection: “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17). It is evident that Jesus was not in Heaven during the three days of his burial. Rather, He was resting in the grave, waiting for His Father to call Him back to life. Thus, the thief could hardly have gone to be with Jesus in Paradise immediately after his death when Jesus Himself did not ascend to the Father until some time after His resurrection. To appreciate more fully the meaning of being “with Christ in paradise,” let us look at Paul’s use of the phrase “being with Christ.”

“To Depart and Be With Christ”

In writing to the Philippians, Paul says: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Phil 1:22-23). Dualists consider this text one of the strongest proofs that at death the soul of the saved immediately goes into the presence of Christ. For example, Robert Morey states: “This is the clearest passage in the New Testament which speaks of the believer going to be with Christ in heaven after death. This context deals with Paul’s desire to depart this earthly life for a heavenly life with Christ. There is no mention of or allusion to the resurrection in this passage.”⁵⁵

The fundamental problem with this interpretation is the failure to recognize that Paul’s statement, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ” is a relational and not an anthropological statement. By this I mean, it is a statement of the relation that exists and continues between the believer and Christ through death, not a statement of the “state” of the body and soul between death and the resurrection.

The New Testament is not concerned about a ‘state’ which exists between death and resurrection, but about a relation that exists between the believer and Christ through death. This relationship of being with Christ

is not interrupted by death because the believer who sleeps in Christ has no awareness of the passing of time.

For Paul those who “die in Christ” are “sleeping in Christ” (1 Cor 15:18; 1 Thess 4:14). Their relation with Christ is one of immediacy because they have no awareness of the passing of time between their death and resurrection. But for those who go on living with earth-bound temporal time there is an interval between death and resurrection. By expressing his desire “to depart and be with Christ,” Paul was not giving a doctrinal exposition of what happens at death. He is simply expressing his longing to see an end to his troubled existence and to be with Christ. Throughout the centuries, earnest Christians have expressed the same longing, without necessarily expecting to be ushered into Christ’s presence at the moment of their death. Paul’s statement must be interpreted on the basis of his clear teachings regarding the time when believers will be united with Christ.

With Christ at His Coming

Paul addresses this question in his letter to the Thessalonians where he explains that both the sleeping and living believers will be united with Christ, not at death, but at His coming. “The dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and *so* we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess 4:17).⁵⁶ The “so” (*houtos*) refers to what he had just described as the way in which believers will be with Christ, namely, *not by dying*, but by being resurrected or translated at His coming.

It should be noted that in describing the union with Christ which believers will experience at His coming, Paul never speaks of disembodied souls being reunited with resurrected bodies. Rather, he speaks of “the dead in Christ” being risen (1 Thess 4:16). Obviously, what is risen at Christ’s coming is not just dead bodies but dead people. It is the whole person who will be resurrected and reunited with Christ. Note that the living saints will meet Christ at the same time “together with” the resurrected saints (1 Thess 4:17). Sleeping and living saints meet Christ “together” at His coming, not at death.

The total absence of any Pauline reference to an alleged reunion of the body with the soul at the time of the resurrection constitutes, in my view, the most formidable challenge to the notion of the conscious survival of the soul. If Paul knew anything about this, he would surely have alluded to it, especially in his detailed discussion of what will happen to sleeping and living believers at Christ’s coming (1 Thess 4:13-18;

1 Cor 15:42-58). The fact that Paul never even hinted about the conscious survival of a disembodied soul and its reattachment to the body at the resurrection clearly shows that such a notion was totally foreign to him and to Scripture as a whole.

“At Home with the Lord”

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul expresses again the hope of being with Christ by using several striking metaphors. This passage is rightly regarded as the “*crux interpretum*,” that is “the cross of interpreters,” primarily because the figurative language is cryptic and open to different interpretations. Unfortunately, dualistic interpreters are eager to derive from this passage, as from Philippians 1:22-23, exact definitions of life and of survival of the soul after the death of the body. Such concerns, however, are far removed from Paul who is using the poetic language of faith to express his hopes and fears regarding the present and future life, rather than the logical language of science to explain the afterlife. All of this should put the interpreter on guard against reading into the passage what Paul never expressed.

The passage opens with the preposition “*for-gar*,” thus indicating that Paul picks up from chapter 4:16-18 where he contrasts the temporal, mortal nature of the present life which is “wasting away” (2 Cor 4:16) with the eternal, glorious nature of the future life, whose “eternal weight of glory [is] beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17). Paul continues in chapter 5 developing the contrast between temporality and eternity by using the imagery of two dwelling places representative of these characteristics.

“For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared for us this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor 5:1-5).

In this first section of the passage, Paul uses two sets of contrasting metaphors. First, he contrasts “the earthly tent,” which is subject to destruction, with the “building from God, a house not made with hands,” which is “eternal in the heavens.” Then Paul highlights this contrast by differentiating between the state of being clothed with the heavenly dwelling and that of being found naked.

The second section, verses 6 to 10, is more straightforward and contrasts being in the body and therefore away from the Lord, with being away from the body and at home with the Lord. The key statement occurs in verse 8 where Paul says: “We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” This passage has been the object of an enormous variety of interpretations which I discuss at length in my book *Immortality or Resurrection?* (pages 180-186).

Heavenly and Earthly Modes of Existence

After rereading the passage countless times, I sense that Paul’s primary concern is not to define the state of the body before and after death, but rather to contrast two modes of existence. One is the heavenly mode of existence which is represented by the “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1). The other is the earthly mode of existence which is typified by “the earthly tent” which is “destroyed” at death.

The meaning of the imagery of “putting on” or “being clothed” with “our heavenly dwelling” has more to do with accepting Christ’s provision of salvation than with “the spiritual body” given to believers at the Second Coming. Support for this conclusion can be seen in the figurative use of “heavenly dwelling” with reference to God and of “being clothed” with reference to the believer’s acceptance of Christ.

Paul’s assurance that “we have a building from God” (2 Cor 5:1) reminds us of such verses as “God is our refuge and strength” (Ps 46:1), or “Lord, Thou hast been our *dwelling place*” (Ps 90:1).⁵⁷ Christ referred to Himself as a temple in a way that is strikingly similar to Paul’s imagery of the heavenly dwelling “not made with hands.” He is reported to have said: “I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). If Paul was thinking along these lines, then *the heavenly dwelling place is Christ Himself and the gift of eternal life He provides to believers.*

How, then, does a believer put on “the heavenly dwelling”? A look at Paul’s use of the metaphor of clothing may provide an answer. “As many as were baptized into Christ were clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:27). In this text, clothing is associated with the acceptance of Christ at baptism. Paul also says: “This perishable being must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal must be clothed with immortality” (1 Cor 15:53, NEB). Here clothing represents the reception of immortality at Christ’s coming. These two references suggest that “clothing” can

refer to new life in Christ, which is accepted at baptism, renewed every day, and consummated at the Parousia, when the final clothing will take place by means of the change from mortality to immortality.

In the light of the above interpretation, to “be found naked” or “unclothed” (2 Cor 5:3-4) may stand in contrast with being clothed with Christ and His Spirit. To Paul “naked” most likely symbolizes guilt and sin resulting in death, not the soul stripped from the body, but for guilt and sin which results in death. When Adam sinned, he discovered that he was “naked” (Gen 3:10). Ezekiel allegorically describes how God clothed Israel with rich garments but then exposed her nakedness because of her disobedience (Ez 16:8-14). One may also think of the man without “the wedding garment” at the marriage feast (Matt 22:11). It is possible, then, that being “naked” for Paul meant to be in a mortal, sinful condition, bereft of Christ’s righteousness.

Paul clarifies what he meant by being “unclothed” or “naked” versus being “clothed” when he says: “So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor 5:4). The same concept is repeated in 1 Corinthians 15:35 which speaks of the comprehensive transformation that human nature experiences at Christ’s coming: “For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:53).

In both passages, 2 Corinthians 5:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 15:35, Paul is not focused on the state of the body or the soul as such before or after death. Incidentally, he never speaks of the soul or of the “spiritual body” in 1 Corinthians 5. Instead, Paul’s concern is to show the contrast between the earthly mode of existence, represented by “earthly tent,” and the heavenly mode of existence, represented by the “heavenly dwelling. The earthly is “mortal” and the heavenly is immortal (“swallowed up by life;” 2 Cor 5:4). The earthly is experienced “at home in the body” and “away from the Lord” (2 Cor 5:6). The heavenly is experienced “away from the body” and “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8).

Failing to recognize that Paul is speaking about two different modes of existence and not about the condition of the body or soul after death has led to unnecessary, misguided speculations about the afterlife. A good example is Robert Peterson’s statement: “Paul confirms Jesus’ teaching when he contrasts being ‘at home in the body’ and ‘away from the Lord’ with being ‘away from the body and at home with the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:6, 8). He presupposes that human nature is composed of material and immaterial aspects.”⁵⁸

This interpretation is empty because neither Jesus nor Paul is concerned with defining human nature ontologically, that is, in terms

of its material or immaterial components. Instead, their concern is to define human nature ethically and relationally, in terms of disobedience and obedience, sin and righteousness, mortality and immortality. This is Paul's concern in 2 Corinthians 5:1-9 where he speaks of the earthly and heavenly modes of existence in relationship to God, and not of the material or immaterial composition of human nature before and after death.

The Souls under the Altar

The last passage we examine is Revelation 6:9-11, which reads: "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?' Then they each were given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

This passage is often cited to support the notion that the "souls" of the saints exist after death in heaven as disembodied, conscious spirits. For example, Robert Morey emphatically states: "The souls are the disembodied spirits of the martyrs who cry out to God for vengeance on their enemies. . . . This passage has always proven a great difficulty to those who deny that believers ascend to heaven at death. But John's language is clear that these souls were conscious and active in heaven."⁵⁹

This interpretation ignores that apocalyptic pictures are not meant to be photographs of actual realities, but symbolic representations of almost unimaginable spiritual realities. John was not given a view of what heaven is actually like. It is evident that there are no white, red, black, and pale horses with warlike riders in heaven. In heaven Christ does not look like a lamb with a bleeding knife wound (Rev 5:6). Likewise, there are no "souls" of martyrs in heaven squeezed at the base of an altar. The whole scene is simply a symbolic representation designed to reassure those facing martyrdom and death that ultimately they will be vindicated by God. Such a reassurance would be particularly heartening for those who, like John, were facing terrible persecution for refusing to participate in the emperor's cult.

The use of the word "souls-*psychas*" in this passage is unique for the New Testament because it is never used to refer to humans in the intermediate state. The reason for its use here is suggested by the unnatural death of the martyrs whose blood was shed for the cause of Christ. In the

Old Testament sacrificial system, the blood of animals was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offerings (Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30). The blood contained the soul (Lev 17:11) of the innocent victim that was offered as an atoning sacrifice to God on behalf of penitent sinners. Thus, the souls of the martyrs are seen under the altar to signify that their blood had been symbolically poured at its base.

The language of sacrificial death is used elsewhere in the New Testament to denote martyrdom. Facing death, Paul wrote: “For I am already on the point of being sacrificed” (2 Tim 4:6). The apostle also says that he was glad “to be poured out as a libation” for Christ (Phil 2:17). Thus, Christian martyrs were viewed as sacrifices offered to God. Their blood shed on earth was poured symbolically at the heavenly altar. Thus their souls are seen under the altar because that is where symbolically the blood of the martyrs flowed.

No Representation of Intermediate State

The symbolic representation of the martyrs as sacrifices offered at the heavenly altar can hardly be used to argue for their conscious disembodied existence in heaven. George Eldon Ladd, a most respected evangelical scholar, rightly states: “The fact that John saw the souls of the martyrs *under the altar* has nothing to do with the state of the dead or their situation in the intermediate state; it is merely a vivid way of picturing the fact that they had been martyred in the name of God.”⁶⁰

The souls of the martyrs are seen as *resting* beneath the altar, not because they are in a disembodied state, but because they are awaiting the completion of redemption (“until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete” Rev 6:11) and their resurrection at Christ’s coming. John describes this event later on, saying: “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . This is the first resurrection” (Rev 20:4).

This description of the martyrs as “beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God” is very much like that of Revelation 6:9. The only difference is that in chapter 6 the deceased martyrs are told to rest, while in chapter 20 they are brought to life. It is evident that if the martyrs are brought to life at the beginning of the millennium in conjunction with Christ’s coming, they can hardly be living in heaven in a disembodied state while resting in the grave.

To sum up, the function of the vision of the martyrs under the heavenly altar is not to inform us on the intermediate state of the dead, but to reassure believers, especially the martyrs who in John's time and later centuries gave their lives for the cause of Christ, that God ultimately would vindicate them.

CONCLUSION

Our study of all the relevant Biblical passages has shown that the notion of the intermediate state in which the souls of the saved enjoy the bliss of Paradise, while those of the unsaved suffer the torments of hell, derives not from Scripture but from pagan Greek dualism.

It is most unfortunate that during much of its history, Christianity by and large has been perverted by the Greek dualistic view of human nature according to which the body is mortal and the soul immortal. The acceptance of this deadly heresy has twisted the translation of Scripture and given rise to a host of other heresies such as Purgatory, eternal torment in hell, prayer for the dead, intercession of the saints, indulgences, an ethereal view of paradise. Some of these popular heresies are examined in later chapters.

Today we face the challenge of helping sincere people recover the Biblical holistic view of human nature and destiny, and thus dispel the spiritual darkness perpetrated by centuries of superstitious beliefs.

This is the challenge the Seventh-day Adventist church is endeavoring to fulfill by divine grace. It is the challenge of leading people around the world to understand, accept, and live by some of the fundamental biblical teachings which are largely ignored or even rejected today.

In this chapter we have examined a fundamental teaching, namely, the biblical view of death and of the state of the dead. The conclusion of our investigation is aptly expressed in the **25th Fundamental belief** of the Seventh-day Adventist Church: "The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed. Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people. When Christ, who is our life, appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and caught up to meet the Lord. The second resurrection, the resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later."⁶¹

 NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

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 41. Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18, 6:8; 20:13; 20:14.
 42. 1 Cor 15:55.
 43. Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12: 5; Jam 3:6.
 44. Karel Hanhart essentially reaches the same conclusion in her doctoral dissertation presented at the University of Amsterdam. She wrote: "We conclude that these passages do not shed any definite light on our problem [of the intermediate state]. In the sense of power of death, deepest realm, place for utter humiliation and judgment, the term Hades does not go beyond the Old Testament meaning of Sheol" (Karel Hanhart, "The Intermediate State in the New Testament," [Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1966], p. 35).

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45. Josephus, *Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, in *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston, 1974, p. 637.
 46. Ibid.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Ibid.
 50. For a brief survey of the intertestamental Jewish literature on the condition of the dead in *hades*, see Karel Hanhart, (note 44), pp. 18-31.
 51. John W. Cooper (note 30), p.139.
 53. Ibid.
 54. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 1983, p. 611.
 55. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 1984, pp. 211-212.
 56. Emphasis supplied.
 57. Emphasis supplied.
 58. Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, 1995, p. 28.
 59. Robert A. Morey (note 55), p. 214.
 60. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 1979, p. 103.
 61. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*, 1988, p. 348.