

The Biblical View Of Death

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

In the last essay (Endtime Issues No. 4) we briefly reviewed the history of the belief in the survival of the soul, focusing especially on recent developments that have revived the notion of conscious existence after death. We saw that spiritualism, the study of near-death experiences, and the channeling (promoted by the New Age Movement, especially through the influence of actress Shirley Maclaine), have all contributed to promoting the view that death is not the cessation of life, but a transition to a different form of existence.

As Christians we cannot afford to passively watch the spreading of the deception of innate immortality that has fostered such heresies as spiritualism, communication with the spirits of the dead, praying for the dead, the intercession of the saints, purgatory, eternal hellfire, the worship of Mary, indulgences, etc. All of these heretical beliefs fall automatically like dominos when we expose the fallacies of conscious life between death and resurrection.

To accomplish this objective we intend to examine in this essay the Biblical understanding of the nature of death. The fundamental questions we plan to address are: 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 component of our being? We shall endeavor to answer these questions by considering the relevant Biblical data.

An Update Report on *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*. You will be pleased to learn that as of today Tuesday, January 19, we have completed processing all the orders we received from the members of our forum for ***The Sabbath Under Crossfire***. It has been a major undertaking to mail over 4000 books during the past five days but we are glad that we have finally caught up. Within the next few days you should receive your copies. If this book thrills your soul, be sure to inform your church members and friends about it.

This past weekend I was invited to share the highlights of ***The Sabbath Under Crossfire*** in San Diego at the NAD Ministerial Advisory council. The response was very encouraging. Several of our Conference Ministerial Secretaries informed me that they want to place a copy of the book in the hands of each of their pastors. It is my fervent hope and prayer that this book, fruit of months of dedicated research, will help many people to meet the many attacks launched against the Sabbath with compelling Biblical arguments.

You might be interested to know that today, Tuesday January 19, I received a telephone call from the Bill Broadway, the Religion Editor of ***Washington Post***. He had just read my brief analysis of Pope John Paul II's Pastoral Letter *Dies Domini* in the last issue ***Liberty*** and was eager to obtain as much information as possible on the legal and theological implication of *Dies Domini* for an article on "The Pope and Sunday Laws" that is scheduled to appear this coming Sunday, January 24, on the Religion Page of the ***Washington Post***. He kept me on the phone for over one hour asking me many insightful questions.

Mr. Broadway requested a copy ***The Sabbath Under Crossfire*** and of my dissertation ***From Sabbath to Sunday*** which I FEDEX to him. He is under tremendous

pressure to finish the article by tomorrow Wednesday, January 20, to meet the deadline of this coming weekend-end edition. I would be most grateful to anyone able to fax me a copy of the article. He seems to be keenly interested to discuss in future issues of **Washington Post** the broad implications of the Sabbath/Sunday issue for Christianity as a whole and for the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. He will be in touch with me again after he has had the chance to read my books. I will keep you updated on future developments.

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 unnatural 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.

This figurative 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 vouchsafed 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 places 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 need to 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 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. For example, 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." 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."

In his **Lectures in Systematic Theology** (widely used as a textbook), Calvinistic theologian Henry Clarence Thiessen expresses himself in a similar way: "Physical death relates to the physical body; the soul is immortal and as such does not die." In his **Christian Dogmatics**, Francis Pieper, a conservative Lutheran theologian,

states most clearly the historic view of death: "Temporal death is nothing other than a tearing asunder of men, the separation of the soul from the body, the unnatural disruption of the union of soul and body which has been created by God to be one." Statements like these could be multiplied, since they are found in most systematic theology textbooks and in all major confessional documents.

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."

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. 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. If believers are already blessed in heaven and the wicked are already tormented in hell, why is the final judgment still necessary? 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.

In his book *The Body*, John A. T. Robinson states: "The soul does not survive a man-it simply goes out, draining away with the blood."⁴⁹ In his monograph *Life after Death*, Taito Kantonen makes this pointed statement: "The Christian view of death is in full accord with the view of natural science as far as the latter goes. When we die we are really dead. Our hopes and desires cannot change this fact. Man does not differ from the rest of creation by having a soul that cannot die."

Even the liberal *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, in its article on death explicitly states: "The 'departure' of the *nephesh* [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it (Num 31:19; Jud 16:30; Ez 13:19). No Biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death. The *ruach* 'spirit' which makes man a living being (cf. Gen 2:7), and which he loses at death, is not, properly speaking, an anthropological reality, but a gift of God which returns to him at the time of death (Eccl 12:7)."

This challenge of 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 belief 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. A case in point is the Worldwide Church of God which lost over half of its members when doctrinal changes were introduced by its leaders early in 1995. The high cost of rectifying denominational religious beliefs should not deter Bible-believing Christians who are committed, not to preserve traditional beliefs for tradition's sake, but to constantly seek for a fuller understanding of the teachings of Word of God on issues relevant to their lives.

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 deprivation 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."

The Hebrew *muth* "to die" is sometimes used, as in English, in a figurative way to denote the destruction or elimination of a nation (Is 65:15; Hos 2:3; Am 2:2), a tribe (Deut 33:6; Hos 13:1), or a city (2 Sam 20:19). None of these figurative uses supports the idea of individual survival. On the contrary, we find that the word *muth* ["to die"] is used in Deuteronomy 2:16 in parallel with *tamam*, which means "to be consumed" or "to be finished." The parallelism suggests that death is seen as the end of life.

The corresponding, ordinary Greek word meaning "to die" is *apothanein* which is used 77 times in the New Testament. With few exceptions, the verb denotes the cessation of life. The exceptions are mostly figurative uses which depend upon the literal meaning. For example, Paul says: "We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died" (2 Cor 5:14). It is evident that this is not referring to physical death but to the effects of Christ's death on the believer's position before God. We could translate "therefore all have died" as "therefore all are counted to have died." None of the literal or figurative uses of the Hebrew *muth* or of the Greek *apothanein* suggests that the "soul" or "spirit" survives the death of an individual.

Old Testament Descriptions of Death. We have just noted that the Hebrew and Greek verbs used in Scripture for "to die" do not really explain the meaning and nature of death, except to tell us that the death of men and animals is identical. More revealing is the use of the Hebrew noun *maveth* which is used about 150 times and is generally translated "death." From the use of *maveth* in the Old Testament, we learn three important things 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 there is no conscious soul that 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 vision 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 examine the significance of the "sleep" metaphor for understanding the nature of death.

Some argue that the intent of the passages we have just quoted and which describe death as an unconscious state "is not to teach that the soul of man is unconscious when he dies," but rather that "in the state of death man can no longer take part in the activities of the present world." In other words, a dead person is unconscious as far as this world is concerned, but his soul is conscious as far as the world of the spirits is concerned. The problem with this interpretation is that it is based on the gratuitous assumption that the soul survives the death of the body, an assumption which is clearly negated in the Old Testament. We have found that in the Old Testament the death of the body, is the death of the soul because the body is the outer form of the soul.

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 at the End on impenitent sinners. 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 like 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), on the Day of Judgment will experience the second death (Rev 20:6; 21:8). 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 figurative meaning of death is to attribute to the word a meaning which is foreign to it. This runs contrary to literary and grammatical 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 described as "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 all through the Old and New Testaments, ending with Peter's statement that "the fathers fell asleep" (2 Pet 3:4). Commenting on these references, Basil Atkinson aptly observes: "Thus the kings and others who died are said to sleep with their fathers. If their spirits were alive in another world, could this possibly be regularly said without a hint that the real person was not sleeping at all?"

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 14:11) 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 a Sleep in the New Testament. Death is described as sleep in the New Testament more frequently than in the Old. The reason may be that 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.

There are two Greek words meaning "sleep" which 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. Incidentally, the root of this word is also the root of the word "home-oikos." So the home and the cemetery are connected because both are a sleeping-place. 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." It is evident that what was resurrected was the whole person and not just the bodies. There is no reference to their souls being reunited with their bodies, obviously because this concept is foreign to the Bible.

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 "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 also 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. As Robertson Nichol puts it, "Had he [Lazarus] learned anything of the spirit world, it must have oozed out."⁵⁶ 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 the same feeling and individuality, but with no afterlife experience to share.

There are no indications that the soul of Lazarus, or of the other six persons raised from the dead, had gone to heaven. None of them had a "heavenly experience" to share. The reason being that 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 here speaking 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 things. First, our study has shown that 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. Leon Morris' comments that "Paul says will bring, not 'will raise'"⁵⁸ is inaccurate, because Paul says both: Christ will raise the dead and bring them with Him. Thus, the context suggests that Christ brings with Him the dead which are raised first, that is, prior to the translation of the living believers.

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 supported by the assurance Paul gave to his readers that living Christians would not meet Christ at His coming before 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 the latter, he probably would have said that without Christ's resurrection the soul 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 significant 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 allusions 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 popular use of the "sleep" metaphor to describe the state of the dead in Christ raises the question of its implications for 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.

A second reason for the use of the "sleep" metaphor is suggested by the fact that it is a hope-inspiring figure of speech to represent death. It implies the assurance 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. Albert Barnes aptly remarks: "In the Scripture sleep is used to intimate that death will not be final: that there will be an awakening out of this sleep, or a resurrection. It is a beautiful and tender expression, removing all that is dreadful in death, and filling the mind with the idea of calm repose after a life of toil, with a reference to a future resurrection in increased vigor and renovated powers."

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 the hope for his or her restoration to life on the day of the resurrection. Bruce Reichenbach notes that the "sleep" metaphor is not only a nice way to speak about death, but more important still, "it strongly suggests that death is not the end of human existence. Just as a person who is sleeping can be raised, so too the dead, as 'sleeping,' have the possibility of being re-created and living again. This is perhaps the significance of the difficult account in Matthew 9:24ff where Jesus says that the girl is not dead, but only sleeping. People who considered her dead had no hope for her. But because Jesus considered her sleeping, He saw that there was hope indeed that she could be resurrected to live again. He saw a potentiality in her that the others, unaware of the power of God, could not see. The metaphor 'sleep,' then, does not describe the ontological state of the dead [that is, the sleeping condition], but rather refers to the possibility of the deceased: that though they now no longer exist, by the power of God they can be recreated to live again."⁶⁰

The Sleep of Death as Unconsciousness. A third reason for 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. It is worth noting that in 1 Corinthians 15 sixteen times Paul uses the verb *egeiro*, which literally means "to wake up" from sleep. The reiterated contrast between sleeping and awakening is impressive. The Bible uses the term "sleep" 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.

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 hence 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 negates 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 ground of immortality," as Vern Hannah puts it, "is soteriological and not anthropological." What this means is that immortality is a divine gift to the saved and not a natural human possession. Nowhere the Bible suggests that immortality is a natural quality or right of human beings. The presence of the "tree of life" in the garden of Eden indicates that immortality was conditional to the partaking of the fruit of such tree. Scripture teaches that "immortality is to be sought (Rom 2:7) and "put on" (1 Cor 15:53). It is, as '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."⁷³ Those who insist in finding the philosophical idea of the immortality of the soul in the Bible, ignore God's revelation and insert dualistic Greek ideas into the Biblical faith.

Conclusion. The traditional and popular belief that death is not the cessation of life for the whole person, but the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body can be traced back to Satan's lie, "You shall not die" (Gen 3:4). This lie has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. Today, belief in the survival of the soul either in paradise or hell is promoted, not through the superstitious and gruesome literary and artistic representations of the Middle Ages, but through the polished image of mediums, psychics, the sophisticated "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling with the spirits of the past. Satan's methods have changed, but his objective is still the same: make people believe the lie that no matter what they do they will not die but will become like gods by living forever.

The traditional view of death limits the death experience to the body, since the soul continues its existence. Vern Hannah rightly states that "such a radical re-definition of death is in fact a denial of death—a definition, no doubt, which the 'subtle serpent' of Genesis 3 would find most appealing." The Bible takes death much more seriously. Death is the last enemy (1 Cor 15:26) and not the liberator of the immortal soul. As Oscar Cullmann puts it, "death is the destruction of all life created by God. Therefore it is death and not the body which must be conquered by the resurrection."

Our only protection against the popular misconception of death is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches on the nature of death. We have found that both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that death is the extinction of life for the whole person. There is no remembrance or consciousness in death (Ps 8:5; 146:4; 30:9; 115:17; Ecc 9:5). There is no independent existence of the spirit or soul 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 frequently used in the Bible to characterize the state of the dead because it fittingly represents the unconscious state of the dead and their awakening on the day of Christ's coming. It suggests that there is no consciousness of time elapsing between death and resurrection. The "sleep" metaphor is truly a beautiful and tender 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.

A major challenge to our conclusion that death in the Bible is the extinction of life for the whole person comes from unwarranted interpretations given to five New Testament passages (Luke 16:19-31; 23:42-43; Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:1-10; Rev 6:9-11) and to the two words, *sheol* and *hades*, which are used in the Bible to describe the dwelling place of the dead. Many Christians find in these texts and words Biblical support for their belief in the conscious existence of the soul after death. We shall proceed to examine these texts and words in Endtime Issues No. 5 which focuses on the state of the dead during the interim period between death and resurrection, commonly called "the intermediate state."

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