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The Biblical View of Death

Adapted from Chapter 4 of IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION

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Throughout human history, people have refused to accept the finality that death brings to life. Death brings an unacceptable, sudden interruption to one's work, plans, and relationships. Though the inscription on many tomb stones often reads "Rest in Peace," the truth of the matter is that most people do not welcome the peaceful rest of the grave. They would rather be alive and productive. Thus, it is not surprising that the subject of death and afterlife always has been a matter of intense concern and speculation. After all, the death rate is still one per person. Each of us at the appointed time will face the grim reality of death.

Today we live in a death-denying culture. People live as if death did not exist. Doctors and hospital personnel generally think that death is something that should not happen. Regardless of how miserable people may feel, they usually respond to "How are you?" with an artificial smile, saying: "Just fine." When we can no longer

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The Devil's Lie

Gianluca Bacchiocchi

During the past several weeks, we have witnessed the death of some of society's most legendary names – Michael Jackson, Walter Cronkite and Ted Kennedy. Neither their fame, power, nor fortune could help them escape that one grisly certainty of life (other than taxes) we all try to avoid. We may try to ignore death, take good care of our health in order to extend our life or, better yet, pray that Christ will return before we have to face death! For most, however, the easiest way to approach the subject of their own mortality, is to focus on the continuation of life after death.

As you read or hear about the death of celebrities, you have probably noted that they are often referred to as being in heaven, looking down on (or at times communicating with) the rest of us who have yet to cross to the other side. The sad reality is that, by believing that our soul survives our death, many have bought into the Devil's first and most deadly lie, "You shall not die," a lie which has been perpetuated throughout the centuries by some of the world's greatest thinkers.

Regardless of what society in general may believe, God, in His Word, has given us clear evidence that death is the complete cessation of life. But the story does not end there, we serve a resurrected Savior, who promises to revitalize our bodies (whether alive or dead) and clothe us with immortality! How wonderful that the hope we have is not one of a body-less, ethereal eternity, but of forever enjoying the blessings of God with Him, in the flesh! In the famous words of Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-17.) May the Holy Spirit ignite your heart and mind with this same yearning as you read the following study which has been adapted from chapter 4 of my late father's book, **IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION**.

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Introducing the Endtime Issues Newsletter Advisory Committee

We are very proud to announce the Endtime Issues Newsletter Advisory Committee, consisting of six outstanding religious, legal and scientific scholars who will help ensure that the Endtime Issues Newsletter will continue to examine significant current issues from a biblical perspective. These individuals are:

Dr. Fernando Canale, PhD, *Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.* Dr. Canale has authored numerous articles in academic journals and professional magazines as well as books in the area hermeneutics, theological method, and Systematic Theology.

Dr. Roy E. Gane, PhD, *Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.* Having specialized in the biblical sanctuary services, Old Testament law, and the book of Daniel, Dr. Gane is particularly interested in applying insights from them to modern life in light of the way Christ saves His people. He has written seven books and numerous articles and study guides. Dr. Gane is currently the President of the Adventist Theological Society.

Dr. Nicholas P. Miller, Esq., *Associate Professor of Church History, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University; Director, Andrews University International Religious Liberty Institute.* Mr. Miller has worked as a trial attorney for the government, as an advocate for religious freedom on Capitol Hill, and as a litigator for religious colleges, hospitals and churches. He has appeared before the Supreme Court in cases relating to religious freedom, as well as before many other state and federal courts. He is presently completing his PhD dissertation in American legal and religious history from the University of Notre Dame, and is widely published on the topic of religious liberty.

Dr. Thomas Shepherd, PhD, *Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.* Dr. Shepherd has been active in scholarly research on the Gospel of Mark helping to found the Mark Group of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Sabbath in Text,

Tradition, and Theology Consultation. He has authored scholarly articles and book chapters on the Gospel of Mark and has appeared on the 3ABN program, Books of the Book, recording a series of studies on the Gospel of Mark as well as producing an audio cassette series on the Gospel of Mark with The Ambassador Group.

Dr. Timothy G. Standish, PhD, *Researcher, Geoscience Research Institute.* Dr. Standish's publications cover topics ranging from the molecular basis of behavior in crickets, to Intelligent Design and public policy. In addition, he has authored many academic and popular papers dealing with faith and science. Interactions between science, faith and public policy are Dr. Standish's primary interest at present.

Dr. Ranko Stefanovic, PhD, *Professor of New Testament, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.*

We are very grateful that these individuals have agreed to help continue this newsletter legacy that was begun by Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi nearly 11 years ago. In the upcoming issues, we will be publishing articles by these scholars, among others, that will be sure to provide unique insights on the many issues and challenges that we face as Bible believing Christians. Please keep in mind that the articles published by the Endtime Issues Newsletter may not necessarily represent the viewpoints of each of these members. However, by God's grace, we hope that the articles published in the Endtime Issues Newsletter will provide you with information that will not only enhance your personal walk with Christ, but also increase your desire to serve Him here on Earth.

Ordering Books, DVDs and CDs from Biblical Perspectives

Biblical Perspectives began offering in May a new pricing scheme for all of the books, DVDs and CDs that it carries. In order to obtain this new pricing, please call us at (269) 471-2915 or write to Biblical Perspectives, 4975 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103. Our website, www.biblicalpherspectives.com, does reflect the new single book pricing, but not the new mix and match pricing. We hope to have our updated website up and running soon and plan to include the new pricing scheme on our updated website. If you have any questions regarding the ordering of materials, you can also email Daniel Bacchiocchi at dan@biblicalpherspectives.com.

Projectors

If you or your organization is interested in purchasing a Hitachi projector with a 3 year manufacturer warranty, please call Biblical Perspectives at (269) 471-2915 and ask for Daniel or email Daniel directly at dan@biblicalpherspectives.com. He will be more than happy to help you purchase the right projector for your purpose as well as any peripherals that you many need.

*The Biblical View of Death
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maintain the facade, we begin to wonder, "What is going to happen to me now?"

Even at the end of life, we tend to deny the reality of death by embalming the dead and using cosmetics to restore the corpse to a natural, healthy look. We dress the dead in suits and gowns as if they were going to a party instead of returning to dust. A special mourning color that has been prevalent in most countries, such as white or black, is gradually disappearing, because people do not want to believe that death is an intrusion that terminates their life.

The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form of afterlife.

In recent years, courses on death and dying have been introduced in many colleges and high schools. Some colleges and universities also offer courses on the occult and other phenomena such as near-death experiences which allegedly offer scientific evidence for life beyond death. All of these trends suggest there is a renewed interest today to unravel the mystery of death and to gain reassurance about some form of life after death.

Objectives of This Study. This study pursues two major objectives. First, we briefly review 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 shall see 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.

Second, we examine the Biblical understanding of 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 component of our being?

To find answers to these questions, we will search the Scriptures examining all the pertinent passages. Scripture must always be allowed to interpret the Scripture. Passages which pose some problems must be interpreted in the light of those that are clear. By following this principle known as the analogy of faith, we can resolve the apparent contradictions we find in the Bible.

PART I: A HISTORICAL GLIMPSE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SURVIVAL OF THE SOUL

"You Will Not Die." To set the stage for this study of the Biblical view of death, it may be helpful to look briefly at the history of the belief in the survival of the soul after death. The serpent's lie, "You will not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on throughout human history to our time. The belief in some form of life after death has been held in practically every society. The need for reassurance and certainty in the light of the challenge that death poses to human life has led people in every culture to formulate beliefs in some form of afterlife.

In the history of Christianity, death has been defined generally as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body. This belief in the survival of the soul at the death of the body has been expressed in various ways and given rise to such corollary doctrines as prayer for the dead, indulgences, purgatory, intercession of the saints, the eternal torment of hell, etc. Since the time of Augustine (A. D. 354-430), Christians have been taught that between death and resurrection—a period known as "the intermediate state"—the souls of the dead either enjoy the beatitude of Paradise or suffer the affliction of Purgatory or Hell. The disembodied condition of the soul is supposed to continue until the resurrection of the body which will bring completion to the salvation of the saints and to the damnation of the wicked.

During the Middle Ages, the fear of death and speculation about what happens to the soul after death gripped the imagination of people and inspired literary and

theological works. Dante's **DIVINA COMMEDIA** is only a small fragment of the immense literary and artistic works which graphically depict the torments of the sinners' soul in Purgatory or Hell, and the blessedness of the saints' soul in Paradise.

The belief in the survival of the soul contributed to the development of the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where the souls of the dead are purified by suffering the temporal punishment of their sins before ascending to Paradise. This widely believed doctrine burdened the living with emotional and financial stress. As Ray Anderson puts it, "Not only did one have to earn enough to live, but also to pay off the 'spiritual mortgage' for the dead as well."¹

Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

Reformers' Rejection of Purgatory. The Protestant Reformation started largely as a reaction against the medieval superstitious beliefs 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 in the conscious existence of souls either in Paradise or Hell during the intermediate state. Calvin expressed this belief far more aggressively than Luther.² In his treatise **PSYCHOPANNYCHIA**,³ which he wrote against the Anabaptists who taught that souls simply sleep between death and resurrection, Calvin argues that during the intermediate state the souls of the believers enjoy the bliss of heaven; 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, this doctrine of the intermediate state has been accepted by most Protestant churches and is reflected in various Confessions.⁴

The Westminster Confession (1646), regarded as the definitive statement of Presbyterian beliefs in the English-speaking world, states: "The body 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."⁵ The confession continues declaring as unbiblical the belief in purgatory.

By rejecting as unbiblical the popular superstitions regarding the suffering of souls in purgatory, the Reformers paved the way for a reexamination of human nature by the rationalistic philosophers of the Enlightenment. These philosophers did not immediately abandon the notion of the immortality of the soul. The first significant attack on the belief in the survival of life after death came from David Hume (A. D. 1711-1776), an English philosopher and historian. He questioned the immortality of the soul, because he believed that all knowledge comes from the sensory perceptions of the body.⁶ Since the death of the body marks the end of all sensory perception, it is impossible for the soul to have conscious existence after the death of the body.

The decline in the belief in an afterlife reached its climax by the mid-eighteenth century as atheism, skepticism, and rationalism spread in France, England, and America. The publication of Darwin's **ORIGIN OF SPECIES** (1859) inflicted another blow on supernaturalism and especially on the immortality of the soul. If human life is the product of spontaneous generation, then human beings have no divine spirit or immortal soul in them. Darwin's theories challenged people to seek "scientific" evidence for supernatural phenomena, such as the survival of the soul.

Spiritualism and the Revival of Interest in the Soul.

Public interest in the life of the soul after death was soon revived with the publication of **THE COMING RACE** (1860) by Bulmer-Lytton. This book influenced a host of writers who contributed to making occult practices fashionable in British society. In America, the public interest in communicating with the souls of the dead was ignited by the séances held by the Fox sisters who lived in Hydesdale, New York. On March 31, 1848, they conducted a séance in which the alleged spirit of a murdered man, who called himself William Duesler, informed them that if they dug in the basement, they would find his corpse. This proved to be true; a body was found.

Since the spirits of the dead at the Fox house communicated by a rapping sound on the table, "table rapping" séances became fashionable all across America

and England as a way of communicating with the spirit of the dead. This phenomenon attracted the attention of numerous learned persons, who in 1882 organized the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Henry Sedgwich, a noted philosopher at Cambridge, became instrumental in gathering into the society some of the most influential people of the day, including William Gladstone (former British prime minister) and Arthur Balfour (future prime minister).

An important outcome of the SPR movement is represented by the work of Joseph Banks Rhine, who in 1930 began researching conscious life after death. Rhine was trained as a biologist at the University of Chicago and later became involved with the SPR while teaching at Harvard University. He redefined and relabeled the subjects that the SPR had researched for years by coining such terms as “extrasensory perception” (ESP), “paranormal psychology,” or “parapsychology.” This was designed to give scientific credibility to the study of the afterlife. Later Rhine, together with William McDougal who served as president for both the British and American SPR groups, set up a Department for Psychic Studies at Duke University. The Russians conducted their own psychic experiments. Their findings were published in a popularized form in **PSYCHIC DISCOVERIES BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN** by Sheila Ostrander and Lynn Schroeder (1970).

In the late 1960s, the late Episcopal bishop James A. Pike gave new and widespread attention to the idea of communicating with the spirits of the dead by communicating on a regular basis with his deceased son. Today our society is flooded with mediums and psychics who advertise their services nationwide through TV, magazines, radio, and newspapers. In their book **AT THE HOUR OF DEATH**, K. Osis and E. Haraldson write: “Spontaneous experiences of contact with the dead are surprisingly widespread. In a national opinion poll . . . 27 percent of the American population said they had encounters with dead relatives, . . . widows and widowers . . . reported encounters with their dead spouses twice as often—51 percent.”⁷ Communication with the spirits of the dead is not just an American phenomenon. Surveys conducted in other countries reveal a similar high percentage of people who engage the services of mediums to communicate with the spirit of their deceased loved ones.⁸

In their book **IMMORTALITY OR EXTINCTION?** Paul and Linda Badham, both professors at St. David University in

Wales, devote a chapter to “The Evidence from Psychical Research” to support their belief in conscious life after death. They wrote: “Some people believe that direct contact with the dead can be achieved through mediums who allegedly have the ability, while in a state of trance, to transmit messages between the dead and the living. Belief in the reality of such communications is the lifeblood of the Spiritualist Churches, and mourners who consult mediums are often impressed by the convincing descriptions of departed loved-ones which the mediums give. On occasion a medium may also show knowledge of the deceased’s former life.”⁹

The Badhams acknowledge that in many cases mediums are charlatans who base their communications on “acute observation and intelligent guesswork.”¹⁰ Yet, they believe that there is “genuine evidence for the human personality’s survival of bodily death.”¹¹ They support their belief by reporting the cases of several members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), who after their death began sending messages to living members of the SPR to prove that they had survived death.¹²

People who through mediums have been able to communicate with the alleged spirits of their deceased loved ones have reason to believe in the immortality of the soul.

It is not our intent to dispute the ability of some mediums to receive and transmit messages from spirits. The question is whether such messages are from the spirits of the dead or from the spirits of Satan. We address this question later in this study, in conjunction with our study of King Saul’s consultation of the medium of Endor (1 Sam 28:7-25). At this juncture, it suffices to note that spiritualism still plays a major role today in fostering the belief in the survival of the soul after death. People who through mediums have been able to communicate with the alleged spirits of their deceased loved ones have reason to believe in the immortality of the soul.

Near-Death Experiences. Another significant development of our time, which has contributed to promote belief in the survival of the soul, is the study of “near-death experiences.” Such studies are based on reports from people who have been resuscitated from a close encounter with death, and from doctors and nurses who have recorded the deathbed experiences of some of their patients.

The experiences reported by persons who have had a close encounter with death often parallel what many believe to be the life of the soul in Paradise. Though no two reports are the same, some of the common characteristics are: the impression of peacefulness, the sensation of being pulled very rapidly through a dark space of some kind, floating in a weightless, spiritual body, the awareness of being in the presence of a spiritual being, an encounter with a bright light, often identified with Jesus Christ or an angel, and a vision of a city of light.¹³ Such experiences are interpreted as proof that at death the soul leaves the body and lives in a disembodied condition.

Survival as a disembodied soul or spirit in an ethereal world hardly compares with the Biblical hope of the resurrection of the whole person to a real life on this planet earth renewed to its original perfection.

Reports of near-death experiences are not new. They can be found in Classical literature, such as the **HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH AND PEOPLE** by the Venerable Bede, the **TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD** edited by W.Y. Evans-Wentz, **PRIMITIVE CULTURE** by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, and the **REPUBLIC** by Plato.¹⁴ In the **REPUBLIC**, Plato gives a remarkable account of a near-death experience, which he uses to substantiate the belief in the immortality of the soul. He wrote:

“Er, the son of Armenius, by race a Pamphylian. He once upon a time was slain in battle, and when the corpses were taken up on the tenth day already decayed, was found intact, and having been brought home, at the moment of his funeral, on the twelfth day as he lay upon the pyre, revived, and after coming to life related what, he said, he had seen in the world beyond. He said that when his soul went forth from his body he journeyed with a great company and that they came to a mysterious region where there were two openings side by side in the earth, and above and over against them in the heaven two others, and that judges were sitting between these, and that after every judgment they bade the righteous journey to the right and upward through the heaven with tokens attached to them in front of the judgment passed upon them, and the unjust to take the road to the left and downward, they too wearing behind signs of all that had befallen them, and that when he himself drew near they told him that he must be the messenger to mankind to tell them of that other

world, and they charged him to give ear and to observe everything in the place. . . . Yet how and in what way he returned to the body he said he did not know, but suddenly recovering his sight he saw himself at dawn lying on the funeral pyre.”¹⁵

Plato concludes his story with this revealing comment: “So the tale was saved. . . . And it will save us if we believe it . . . that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all the extremes of good and evil.”¹⁶ One wonders what kind of salvation the belief in the immortality of the soul can offer to a person. Survival as a disembodied soul or spirit in an ethereal world hardly compares with the Biblical hope of the resurrection of the whole person to a real life on this planet earth renewed to its original perfection.

Studies of Near-Death Experiences. In our time, the study of near-death experiences was largely pioneered by American psychiatrist Raymond A. Moody. His two seminal books, **LIFE AFTER LIFE** (1975) and **REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AFTER LIFE** (1977) have generated a multitude of books, articles, and debates that address out-of-body experiences.¹⁷ “More recently, a bibliography of books and articles relevant to near-death experiences has been published, listing two and a half thousand titles.”¹⁸

Moody studied 150 persons who had near-death experiences and, in some cases, who clinically were dead. The question is how the data should be interpreted. Moody’s publisher asserts that the reports are “actual case histories that reveal there is life after death.”¹⁹ Moody himself, however, is far more cautious. He explicitly denies that he tried “to construct a proof of survival of bodily death,” even though he regards the data as “highly significant” for such a belief.²⁰ He leaves open the possibility of conceiving of near-death experiences as intimations of immortality or merely as the result of terminal physiological events.

It is not our intent to examine the alleged probative value of near-death experiences for the belief in the survival of the soul. Our normative authority for defining human nature is not the subjective near-death experiences of people, but the objective revelation God has provided us in His Word (2 Pet 1:19). Thus, only three basic observations about near-death experiences are considered here.

First, there is the problem of defining death. The *Editor of Lancet*, a journal dedicated to medical research, points out that “only a deliberate use of obsolete definitions of death can enable one to claim that anybody has, under

clinical conditions, returned to tell us what lies beyond death, for by working definition, periodically updated, death is just beyond the point from which anybody can return to tell us anything.”²¹ Similarly, Professor Paul Kurts comments, “We have no hard evidence that the subjects had in fact died. Such a proof is not impossible to obtain: rigor mortis is one sign and brain death is another. What the accounts actually describe is ‘dying process or near-death experience, not death itself.’”²²

Second, we need to remember, as Paul and Linda Badham observe, that “any person hovering between life and death must be suffering profound physical and psychological stress. A brain starved of oxygen, drugged by hallucinatory painkillers, or excited by fever is hardly likely to function properly and who knows what visions could be accounted for by its disturbed conditions?”²³ Some research has shown the similarity that exists between near-death experiences and the effects caused by psychedelic drugs. “Modern consciousness-research has shown that these similarities can be reproduced by drugs in psychedelic sessions. These experiences, thus, tend to belong to the continuum of psychic experiences, which have proved, not life after death, but that the relation between the conscious self and the embodied self is more complex than previously thought.”²⁴

Lastly, how can it be established that near-death experiences are “real experiences,” rather than the product of the patients’ own mind? And why is it that nearly all the reports of near-death experiences concern happiness and heavenly fulfillment, but no glimpses of the fiery torments of hell? It is evident that when people are dying they prefer to dream about the bliss of heaven rather than the suffering of hell. But even the vision of heaven depends largely upon one’s religious background.

Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson evaluated the reports of more than 1,000 deathbed experiences in the USA and India. They found that the vision of the Hindu patients was typically Indian, while that of the American was Western and Christian. For example, one college-educated Hindu woman had the experience of being brought to heaven on a cow, while an American patient who had prayed to St. Joseph encountered her patron saint in the experience.²⁵ Such reports about afterlife experiences reflect the personal beliefs of the patients. What they experienced in the process of dying was most likely conditioned by their personal beliefs.

We should always remember that deathbed or near-death experiences are experiences of people who are still alive or whose mind has regained consciousness. Whatever they experience under such circumstances is still part of their present life and not of life after death. The Bible does report the cases of seven of people who were raised from the dead (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:25-37; Luke 7:11-15; 8:41-56; Acts 9:36-41; 20:9-11), but none of them had an afterlife experience to share.

Lazarus was brought back to life after being clinically dead for four days did not report any exciting out-of-the-body experiences. The reason is simple. Death according to the Bible is the cessation of life of the whole person, body and soul. There is no form of conscious existence between death and resurrection. The dead rest unconsciously in their tombs until Christ will call them forth on the glorious day of His coming.

It is evident that when people are dying they prefer to dream about the bliss of heaven rather than the suffering of hell.

New Age Movement. The belief in conscious life after death is popularized today especially by the New Age Movement.²⁶ Defining this popular movement is not easy, because it represents a network of organizations and individuals who share common values and a common vision. These values are derived from Eastern/occult mysticism and a pantheistic world view according to which all share in the One who is God. They envision a coming “new age” of peace and mass enlightenment, known as the “Age of Aquarius.”

New Agers may differ on when and how the New Age begins, but they all agree that they can hasten the new order by becoming involved in the political, economic, social, and spiritual life. According to some social analysts, the New Age Movement has become a major cultural trend of our time. Elliot Miller defines it as “a third major social force vying with traditional Judeo-Christian religion and secular humanism for cultural dominance.”²⁷

For the New Agers, the ultimate reality is a pantheistic God manifested as an impersonal, infinite consciousness, and force. Human beings are part of the divine consciousness and are separated from God only in their own consciousness. By means of specific techniques, like meditation, chanting, ecstatic dancing, and sensory deprivations, New Agers seek to experience oneness

with God. Thus, salvation for the New Ager is equated with self-realization through special spiritual techniques.

The Channeling Craze. An important aspect of the New Age Movement is the alleged communication with departed human and extra-human intelligences. This phenomenon is known as “channeling,” but it has been rightly called “Spiritism New Age Style.”²⁸ Miller rightly notes that “spiritism has played a part historically in virtually all forms of paganism. Those who have allowed spirits to use their bodies in this way have been called a variety of names, including ‘shaman,’ ‘witch doctor,’ ‘medicine man,’ ‘oracle,’ ‘fortune-teller,’ and ‘seer.’ In our culture, the common term has been ‘medium,’ but in recent years it has been largely abandoned in favor of ‘channel’ or ‘channeler,’ reflecting, in part, a desire to break free from negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with mediums over the years.”²⁹

A “channeler” is essentially a person who claims to be the recipient of teachings and wisdom from the great spirits of the past. The channeling business is booming in all the major American cities. According to *The Los Angeles Times*, in a decade the number of known professional channelers in Los Angeles has increased from two to over one thousand in a decade.³⁰ This is compelling channelers to employ Madison Avenue psychology to sell their services.

An advertisement by Taryn Krive, a popular channeler, gives a good idea of the services they provide: “Through Taryn, a number of Spirit Guides bring forth their teachings and messages. They will answer your questions regarding this life and other lives. They will help you identify your life lessons and unblock your highest potential for living and loving. . . . Meet your Spirit Guides. Learn to recall your past lives and release their influences from the present. Develop your channeling abilities (conscious channeling, automatic writing, trance channeling).”³¹

An important factor which has contributed to the success of the New Age is its claim to connect people not only with their deceased loved ones, but also with the Great Spirits of the past.

The person who has played a leading role in promoting the New Age Movement, especially channeling, is the famous actress Shirley Maclaine. Her books have sold over five million copies. The *Out on a Limb* mini-series sparked an unprecedented interest in channeling. Maclaine takes seriously her role as the chief evangelist

of the New Age. Following her TV mini-series, she held two-day, nationwide seminars called “Connecting with the Higher Self.” Later she used the proceeds from the seminars to establish a 300 acre spiritual center near Pueblo, Colorado. The purpose of the center is to provide a trusted place where people can communicate with higher Spirits.³²

An important factor which has contributed to the success of the New Age is its claim to connect people not only with their deceased loved ones, but also with the Great Spirits of the past. As parapsychologist and channel Alan Vaughan points out: “The thrill, the immediacy of that contact with another consciousness, may be the driving force behind the phenomenal growth of the practice of channeling.”³³

Death as Transition to Higher Existence.

Communicating with the spirits of the dead is based on the belief that death is not the end of life, but merely a transition to a higher plane of existence which makes it possible in time to reincarnate either on earth or elsewhere. Virginia Essene, who claims to be speaking as a channel for “Jesus,” states: “Death is an automatic and nearly immediate entrance into a greater sphere of learning, growth, and service to which you are well-accustomed already. You simply live at that higher level of purpose, joy and understanding.”³⁴

In many ways, the New Age’s view of death as the immediate entrance into a higher sphere of living reflects the traditional Christian belief in the conscious survival of the soul at death. Both beliefs can be traced back to the first lie uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden: “You will not die” (Gen 3:4). This lie has lived on through the centuries with devastating effects on both Christian and non-Christian religions.

In his penetrating analysis of the New Age Movement, Elliot Miller keenly observes: “It has been rightly noted by many Christian observers that the core New Age/channeling doctrines, ‘You can be as God,’ and ‘You shall not die,’ were first uttered by the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:4-5). Embraced then, this ‘gospel’ produced all of the world’s misery. Embraced now, it will make all that God has done in Christ to remedy the situation of no avail to the individual in question.”³⁵

Miller is right in noting that the belief in innate immortality promoted by the New Age today makes of no avail Christ’s provision of salvation, since people think they already have the resources to enter into a higher

level of existence after death. Unfortunately, Miller fails to realize that the success of the New Age in promoting such a belief is largely due to the traditional Christian dualistic view of human nature. Christians who believe that the body is mortal and the soul immortal have no major difficulty in accepting the New Age view of death as the transition into a higher sphere of living. After all, the latter largely corresponds to the belief in the conscious existence of the saints' souls in the bliss of Paradise.

Conclusion. The preceding survey shows how Satan's lie, "You shall not die" (Gen 3:4) has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time. While during the Middle Ages, belief in the afterlife was promoted through literary and artistic, superstitious representations of the bliss of the saints and the torments of the sinners, today such a belief is propagated in a more sophisticated way through mediums, psychics, "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and 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 become like gods by living for ever. Our only protection against such a deception is through a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about the nature of death and the state of the dead. To these questions we now turn our attention.

PART II: THE NATURE OF DEATH

The Death of Socrates and of Christ. To illustrate the Biblical view of death, Oscar Cullmann contrasts the death of Socrates with that of Jesus.³⁶ In his book **PHAEDO**, Plato offers an impressive description of the death of Socrates. On the day of his death, Socrates taught his disciples the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and showed them how to live out such a belief in dying. He explained to his disciples how to liberate the soul from the prison of the body by occupying oneself with the eternal truths of philosophy. Since death completes the process of liberating of the soul, Plato tells us that Socrates went to his death by drinking the hemlock in complete peace and composure. For Socrates, death was the soul's greatest friend because it sets the soul free from the shackles of the body.

How different was Jesus' attitude toward death! On the eve of His death in Gethsemane, Jesus was "greatly distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33) and said to His

disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death" (Mark 14:34). For Jesus, death was not a great friend but a dreadful enemy, because it would separate Him from His Father. He did not face death with the composure of Socrates who met death peacefully as a friend. When confronted with the reality of death, Jesus cried to God saying: "Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36).

Jesus knew that to die means to be separated from God. Thus, He cried to God because He did not want to be forsaken by the Father or even by His disciples. What a contrast between Socrates and Jesus in their understanding and experience of death! Cullmann notes that "The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews . . . writes that Jesus 'with loud cries and tears offered up prayers and supplications to him who was able to save him' (Heb 5: 7). Thus, according to the Epistle of Hebrews, Jesus wept and cried in the face of death. There is Socrates, calmly and composedly speaking of the immortality of the soul; here Jesus, weeping and crying."³⁷

The contrast is evident, especially in the death-scene. Socrates drank the hemlock with sublime calm. Jesus cried: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). This is not "death as a friend," but as an enemy. Paul rightly calls it "the last enemy" (1 Cor 15:26), which at the end will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:14).

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 become like gods by living for ever.

If death released the soul from the body and thus made it possible for the soul to enjoy communion with God, then Christ would have welcomed death for offering Him the opportunity to be reunited with His Father. But Jesus saw death as separation from God, who is life and the Creator of all life. He sensed this separation more than any other human being, because He was and still is closely connected to God. He experienced death in all its horror, not only in the body but also in His soul. This is why He cried: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46).

The contrast between the death of Socrates and the death of Jesus helps us to appreciate the Biblical view of death. In Greek thought, the death of the body was not in any sense the destruction of the true life. In Biblical

thought, 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."³⁸ This is why the resurrection of Jesus is so fundamental to the Christian faith. It provides the needed reassurance that death has been conquered for those who accept Christ's provision of salvation.

Cullmann points out that "belief in the immortality of the soul is not belief in a revolutionary event. Immortality, in fact, is only a negative assertion: the soul does not die, but simply lives on. Resurrection is a positive assertion: the whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation of God. Something has happened—a miracle of creation! For something has also happened previously, something fearful: life formed by God has been destroyed."³⁹

Thus, life and death in the Bible have religious and ethical significance because they are dependent upon human obedience or disobedience to God.

Sin and 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."⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹

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."⁴² 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."⁴³ 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."⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ If believers are already blessed in heaven and the wicked are already tormented in hell, why is the final judgment still necessary?⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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."⁵⁰

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)."⁵¹

The **INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BIBLE ENCYCLOPEDIA** acknowledges that "we are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea, that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the

Old Testament. The whole man dies, when in death the spirit (Ps 146:4; Eccl 12:7), or soul (Gen 35:18; 2 Sam 1:9; 1 Kings 17:21; Jonah 4:3), goes out of a man. Not only his body, but his soul also returns to a state of death and belongs to the netherworld; therefore the Old Testament can speak of a death of one's soul (Gen 37:21; Num 23:10; Deut 22:21; Jud 16:30; Job 36:14; Ps 78:50)."⁵²

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

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.

Since at death the “thoughts perish,” it is evident there is no conscious soul that survives the death of the body.

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.”⁵⁴ 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 (1Cor 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.

Christ's victory over death affects the believer's understanding of physical, spiritual, and eternal 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 Atkinsom 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?"⁵⁵

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 anymore. 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” (John 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.

As Christ slept in the tomb prior to His resurrection, so believers sleep in the grave while awaiting their resurrection.

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.

Why should they grieve for their loved ones if they were already enjoying the bliss of heaven?

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."⁵⁹

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

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 9:24, 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. In his early writings, 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."⁶¹ 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."⁶²

For the sake of accuracy, it must be pointed out that later in life Luther largely rejected the notion 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."⁶³ 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 theological pressures of their time.

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.

Like Luther, most Christians today believe that the "sleep" metaphor is used in the Bible to teach, not the unconscious state of the dead, but that "there is a resurrection, an awakening."⁶⁴ Some scholars argue that death is compared to a sleep, "not because a person is unconscious, but because the dead do not return to this earth nor are aware of what is happening where they once lived."⁶⁸ In other words, the dead are unconscious as far as what happens on the earth, but are very conscious as far as their life in Heaven or Hell.

This conclusion is not based on Scripture, but on the use of the "sleep" metaphor in intertestamental literature. For example, 1 Enoch, dated about 200 B. C., speaks of the righteous as having "a long sleep" (100:5), but their souls are conscious and active in heaven (102:4-5; cf. 2 Baruch 36:11; 2 Esdras 7:32). After examining this literature, John Cooper concludes: "The metaphors of sleep and rest are used of persons in the intermediate state who are conscious and active, but not in earthly, bodily ways."⁶⁶

The Biblical meaning of the "sleep" metaphor cannot be decided on the basis of its use in the intertestamental literature, because, as we have seen, during that period, Hellenistic Jews tried to harmonize the teachings of the Old Testament with the Greek dualistic philosophy of their time. The outcome was the adoption of such beliefs as the immortality of the soul, the reward or punishment given immediately after death, and prayers for the dead. Such beliefs are foreign to the Bible.

Our study of the "sleep" metaphor in the Old and New Testaments has shown that the metaphor implies a state of unconsciousness that will last until the awakening at the resurrection. It is worth noting that in 1 Corinthians 15 sixteen times Paul uses the verb *egeiro*, which literally means "to wake up" from sleep.⁶⁷ 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.

The Meaning and Ground of Immortality. Immortality in the Bible is not an innate human possession but a divine attribute. We noted already that 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."⁷¹ What this means is that immortality is a divine gift to the saved and not a natural human possession. As P. T. Forsyth said, "a sure belief in immortality does not rest where philosophy puts it, but where religion puts it. It is not founded on the nature of the psychic organism, but on its relation to Another."⁷² The "Another" is Jesus Christ "who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10).

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.”⁷⁴ 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.”⁷⁵

Helmut Thielicke keenly observes that the idea of the immortality of the soul is a form of escapism which allows the “real” person to evade death. It is an attempt to disarm death. He goes on explaining that “we may hold in idealistic fashion to some ‘inviolable ego region,’ but death is not a ‘passing over’ but a ‘going under,’ and it leaves no room for romanticism or idealism. We may not devaluate and obscure the reality of the grave through the idea of immortality. The Christian outlook is resurrection, not the immortality of the soul.”⁷⁶

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.

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 “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. These texts and words are examined chapter 5 of **IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION** 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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