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Chapter Ten

THE INHERENT IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL?

It must occur to every thoughtful reader that if the SOUL²²⁰ is immortal even though the body is not, the soul is quite capable of continuance while the body awaits the resurrection. And by *continuance* what else could be understood than *conscious* continuance?

Now, *conscious* continuance can only be viewed as either requiring a body, or *not* requiring a body. These are the only two possibilities. If the body is necessary, then clearly *conscious* continuance requires that the body must be reunited with the soul at once — without any interval of disruption whatever. If the body is *not* necessary, then the resurrection of the body seems pointless. What purpose could it serve?

The dilemma: soul conscious or unconscious?

In a nutshell, this is the dilemma that has always been faced by those who address themselves to the nature of a supposed intermediate state based on the immortality of the soul and its self-sufficiency. But the dilemma in this case exists only so long as we assume that immortality of the soul *also* means its uninterrupted consciousness.

But it is clear that uninterrupted *consciousness* is not essential to continued existence, since we sleep at night and wake in the morning without any interruption of our existence. Our identity remains intact. Coma can last for months, with little or no disturbance of personal identity when consciousness is regained.

²²⁰ If one is to be theologically precise, the word “soul” should be “spirit” (see chapter 7, page 94 and also footnote 126). Here, and subsequently, the author chose *not* to be theologically precise in his use of the words “soul” and “spirit”, since the quotations used in this chapter did not do so.

It may further be observed that, surprisingly, the Word of God says nothing explicitly about the inherent immortality of the soul in the commonly accepted sense! The idea is, in fact, not a biblical but a pagan one, imported into early Christian theology from the Greeks; and this — be it noted — in direct opposition to categorical denials by some of the earliest Church Fathers. They never denied that God guarantees the soul's continuance, but they did deny that the soul is by its very nature inherently indestructible.

Views held of the soul's state in this interim

In case this should seem an entirely novel and unwarranted assertion, consider a few such statements as the following. Let us begin with the Jewish view based entirely on the Old Testament. The Jewish people equated heaven with the repossession of Israel's promised kingdom on earth, and for this they recognized not merely the survival of the soul, but that bodily existence was also necessary. On this point, B. S. Easton observed:²²¹

Resurrection of the body was the form immortality took, in accord with the religious premises. As the saint was to find his happiness in the nation, he must be restored to the nation; and the older views did not point toward *pure* [i.e., abstract] soul-immortality. The 'shades' led a wretched existence at the best; and St. Paul himself shudders at the thought of "nakedness" (2 Corinthians 5:3²²²). . . . Where direct Greek influence, however, can be predicated, pure soul immortality *is* found. [Parenthesis and emphasis mine]

It is important to recognize this conflicting stream of Jewish and Greek tradition because the Christian hope is based on an entirely different principle from that which underlies all other religious faiths. Belief in the world to come is by no means uniquely Christian, but belief in a world to come in which a resurrection of one's *own* body is as essential to personal identity as a spirit made alive again, is indeed uniquely Christian. Much of the visionary literature of Christendom regarding the bliss of the saints in a disembodied state between death and resurrection is little more than a baptized reflection of the pagan view of the matter.

²²¹ Easton, B.S., under "Resurrection" in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, James Orr, General Editor, Chicago, Howard-Severance Co., 1915, vol. 4.

²²² "For in this [tabernacle] we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked." 2 Corinthians 5:2 and 3.

Justin Martyr (c. 100 - 165), born only a few years after the death of the Apostle John and therefore representing a near-apostolic tradition, disputed the Greek concept of the inherent immortality of the soul. In his *Dialogue with Trypho, A Jew*, in a section titled, "The Soul is not in its own nature immortal", he wrote that the soul participates in life "so far as God wills it to live".²²³

Tatian (c. 110 - 172) who was his contemporary, seems to have been concerned that Greek influence was becoming too strong in the process of formulating the theology of the early Church. He wrote a treatise known as his *Address to the Greeks*. It is usually dated about 160 A. D. In this he says plainly: "The soul is not itself immortal, O Greeks, but mortal."²²⁴

Irenaeus (d. 195) held that there is no *natural* immortality of the soul. All depends upon the pleasure of God. As the soul's coming into existence depended upon the will of God, so does its continuance.²²⁵

It was not, in fact, until after the Renaissance, when the works of the Greek philosophers began their humanistic leaven of Christian theology, that the concept of the inherent immortality of the soul became part of the common faith of Christendom. Till then, the Church seems to have been content to limit its pronouncements to the fact of the reality of eternal life and the resurrection of the body. Berkouwer speaks of this "noteworthy caution on the part of the doctrinal authority of the Catholic Church which taught that the spirituality of the soul could be proved but not its immortality."²²⁶

According to Basil F. C. Atkinson, Martin Luther listed as the last of five cardinal errors of the papal Church the immortality of the soul, and was followed in this view by William Tyndale.²²⁷ Luther, in his *Assertion of All the Articles Wrongly*

²²³ Justin Martyr: in his *Dialogue with Trypho A Jew*, Chap. 5, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, vol. 1, p.197; and also Franz Delitzsch, *System of Biblical Psychology*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1966 (reprint), p.474.

²²⁴ Tatian: in his *Address to the Greeks*, chaps. 13 and 15, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913, vol. 2, p.71, 72.

²²⁵ Irenaeus' actual words are: "When God therefore bestows life and perpetual duration, it comes to pass that even souls which did not previously exist should henceforth endure [forever], since God has both willed that they should exist, and should continue in existence.", in his *Against Heresies*, Book 2, chap. 34, section 4 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, vol. 1, p.412.

²²⁶ Berkouwer, G. C., *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1962, p.270.

²²⁷ Atkinson, Basil F. C., *Life and Immortality*, published privately in England, 1970, p.iii.

Condemned in the Roman Bull of 29 November, 1520, rejected this Roman Catholic doctrine, calling such an idea a "monstrous opinion" out of the "Roman dunghill of decretals"!

In 1548 John Calvin published his commentary on Paul's first letter to Timothy. He observed (at 1 Timothy 6:16²²⁸) that the soul's coming into existence and its continuance depend entirely on God, so that "properly speaking, it does not have an immortal nature"; and in support of this he cited Acts 17:28.²²⁹

In 1893 James Orr wrote at some length on this matter and concluded that the "Bible knows nothing of an abstract immortality of the soul, as the [Medieval] schools speak of it."²³⁰ He insisted that only when the soul was reunited with the body as a whole person, is there immortality; and this only because it will be forever sustained by God Himself.

In 1901, Herman Bavinck argued cogently that Scripture adopts a position which, to use his own words, "at first sight cannot but astonish us." Even though the importance of the doctrine of the immortality *of the soul* seems paramount for the Christian, yet Bavinck holds that Scripture never treats of it specifically, never announces it as a revealed truth, never places it in the foreground, and never makes any attempt to maintain its truth against opponents. Yet Bavinck himself does not *deny* it. It is only that, objectively, he denies it to be a strictly biblical doctrine. Later on, he observes that "Scripture does not deny but neither does it specifically teach the immortality of the soul: and it surely does not intend, as deism held, to make this immortality known to us as one of the more important truths of religion."²³¹

Thomas B. Strong in his *Manual of Theology* wrote in 1903: "The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is precarious and obscure in a very high degree."²³²
Intermediate state: soul sleep?

In 1915, when James Orr contributed the article on *Immortality* in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (vol. 3, p.1459), he had not changed his earlier views:

²²⁸ “. . .who [God] only hath immortality.” 1 Timothy 6:16.

²²⁹ “For in him we live, and move, and have our being. . . .” Acts 17:28.

²³⁰ Orr, James, *The Christian View of God and the World*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893, p.196.

²³¹ Bavinck, Herman, *Gereformeerde Dogmatic*, 1901, vol. 4, p.567, 591: quoted by G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1962, p.242, 243.

²³² Strong, Thomas B., *Manual of Theology*, London, Adam & Charles Black, 1903, p.400.

In hardly any subject is it more necessary to be careful in the definition of terms and clear distinction of ideas, especially where the Biblical doctrine is concerned, than in this matter of "immortality."

By "immortality" is frequently meant simply the survival of the soul or spiritual part of man, after bodily death. It is the assertion of the fact that death does not end all. The soul survives. This is commonly what is meant when we speak of "a future life," "a future state," "a hereafter."

[Among the heathen] it is a state peculiar to "death"; in most cases shadowy, inert, feeble, dependent, joyless; a state to be dreaded and shrunk from, not one to be hoped for. . . . Among the [more advanced] heathen it is conceived as, for some, a state of happiness — the clog of the body being shaken off — and this yields the idea, which has passed into so much of our modern thinking of an "immortality of the soul," an imperishableness of the spiritual part. . . an inherent indestructibility.

It will be seen as we advance, that the Biblical view is different from all of these. . . . For the Bible, "immortality" is not merely the survival of the soul. . . . The "immortality" that the Bible contemplates is an immortality of *the whole person* — body and soul together. It is not a condition simply of further existence, however prolonged, but a state of blessedness, due to redemption and to the possession of the "eternal life" in the soul; it includes resurrection and perfected life in *both* soul and body.

One use which the Greeks made of the metaphysical argument was to prove the *indestructibility* of the soul — its immortality in the sense of having no beginning and no end. This is not the Christian doctrine. The soul has no such indestructibility.

As Orr observed, the soul is entirely dependent on God for its creation, "and for its continued existence as everything else is. Did He withdraw his sustaining power it would cease to exist. . . . The contrast between the Biblical view of immortality, and that of heathenism and of the [philosophers] will now be obvious. It is not mere future existence; not a bare *abstract* immortality of the soul; it is the result of redemption and of renewal by God's spirit; it embraces the whole personality, soul and body." [emphasis mine]²³³

And in 1962 G. C. Berkouwer does not find "natural" immortality or "indestructibility of the soul" in Scripture. The soul is a creation of God and remains dependent upon his good pleasure. The opposite view, he notes, is a heritage of

²³³ Orr, James: in *International Standard Biblical Encyclopedia*, Chicago, Howard-Severance Co., 1913, vol. 3, p.1459, 1461.

Greek philosophy, primarily through Platonism. "The Christian outlook is resurrection, not the immortality of the soul."²³⁴

David Kerr, in 1960, in an article on *Immortality in Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, observed:²³⁵

It may be said that immortality in the biblical sense is a condition in which the individual is not subject to death or to any influence which might lead to death. God is uniquely immortal in that He is without beginning or end. . . . Man, on the other hand, is immortal only by derivation and when his mortal body has been replaced by one which is immortal.

The biblical idea of immortality thus differs from all others in certain important respects. One of these is that in *non-biblical* teaching man is *inherently* immortal. Another is that it is the spiritual aspect of human nature only which is thought to be immortal. . . . In biblical thought man is not inherently immortal: it is the whole man, body and soul, that is immortal even though the body must undergo a transformation in order to achieve immortality. [Emphasis mine]

We thus see from the evidence of Scripture that it is the whole man who is to achieve immortality, and THIS ONLY BY REASON OF THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY. In this process the body also undergoes transformation, even as by rebirth the spirit has likewise been transformed.

As Kerr observes: "In the Old Testament as well as in the New, man is a complete being only as his body and spirit are in union. He is then a living soul or person (Genesis 2:7²³⁶). . . . Immortality, for the Christian involves the resurrection and may be fully attained only after it."

Franz Delitzsch underscores the fact that the body and the soul or spirit live or die *together*.²³⁷

²³⁴ Berkouwer, G. C., *Man: The Image of God*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1962, p.253.

²³⁵ Kerr, David: under "Immortality" in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, edited by E. F. Harrison, Grand Rapid, Baker, 1960, p.280, 281.

²³⁶ "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." Genesis 2:7.

²³⁷ Delitzsch, Franz, *A System of Biblical Psychology*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1966 (reprint), p.474

Where Scripture speaks of death as a *κρίμα* [*krima*, or sentence] common to men, it is everywhere the whole man who suffers it. Death is a breaking up of the divinely ordained substance of a living being. Body and spirit fall away from one another, and the spirit finds itself, in so far as it is disembodied, in the condition of death. Even of the spirits of the just made perfect this is the case. . . . The resurrection is a restoration of the personal condition that is dissolved by death.

Delitzsch is concerned to emphasize that death is not merely death of the body. The spirit suffers too. Yet for all that, the insult to the spirit by which it is robbed of its medium of expression does not terminate its existence. It only effectively silences it. For, as he says, "*death and annihilation* are by no means coincident ideas. *Actual* continuance of being and *self-conscious* continuance of being are far from necessarily related."²³⁸ [Emphasis mine]

The point is a very important one. The soul may have continuance after death but this does not necessitate *conscious* continuance. The absence of consciousness is not to be taken as evidence of annihilation. When a patient recovers from the total unconsciousness of deep anesthesia in the operating room, he gives every indication that he was by no means non-existent during the interval, nor has he surrendered his identity, whether as viewed introspectively or as known to his friends. It is not known how *long* such a condition might be sustained without serious disturbance of personal identity, but certainly the mere fact of the interjection of a period of unconsciousness is by no means to be equated with the automatic annihilation of personal identity.

The same is true of the body which is to "sleep in the dust" (Daniel 12:2²³⁹). Its identity will surely be recovered as was the identity of Lazarus' body in spite of its incipient disintegration. God can restore it recognizably: or, as we are assured He will at the last Day, He can **re-create it anew** — recognizably, despite its disintegration.

Unconscious existence is still real existence if God wills it. The spirit that returns to God does not need to have consciousness in the interim between death and resurrection of the body in order for its identity to be preserved. God preserves both its identity and the identity of the body; and it is within His power and purpose to raise both into a far more glorious continuance of that identity. If there is a period of unconsciousness as the soul or spirit awaits the body, it cannot be known to the individual: there is no such thing as a conscious state of unconsciousness! So

²³⁸ Delitzsch, Franz, *ibid*, p. 475.

²³⁹ "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel 12:2.

experientially, the interim is unknown because there could never be a consciousness of it so long as body and spirit are separated. Personally, I am persuaded that there will not *be* any such interval of waiting.

A resolution proposed

Let me try to state this even more explicitly. We know from Ecclesiastes 12:7 that the spirit returns to God when the body returns to the dust.²⁴⁰ The Lord Jesus commended *his* spirit to the Father's keeping (Luke 23:36²⁴¹), even as (in Acts 7:59) Stephen commended *his* spirit to the Lord Jesus.²⁴²

There, in God's keeping, the human spirit is preserved in a condition which Scripture designates as "sleep" — as undoubtedly even the Lord's *human* spirit was also preserved till He Himself raised his own body as He said He would (John 2:19, "this temple"²⁴³) and thus reconstituted his humanity. As each redeemed spirit is taken into God's care, these "spirits of just men" (Hebrews 12:23²⁴⁴) are freed of all imperfections, imperfections which are instantly left behind in departing from this world. Their spirits thus made perfect await a like glorification of the body (Philippians. 3:21²⁴⁵). The ultimate immortality of the redeemed spirit is guaranteed by the promise of never again perishing (John 10:28²⁴⁶) *once the body has been*

²⁴⁰ “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” Ecclesiastes 12:7.

²⁴¹ “When Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into your hands I commend my spirit, and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” Luke 23:46.

²⁴² “And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Acts 7:59.

²⁴³ “Jesus answered them and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and will you rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body.” John 2:19-21.

²⁴⁴ “[But you are come]. . . to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus. . . .” Hebrews 12:22a, 23b.

²⁴⁵ “[Christ] who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body. . . .” Philippians 3:21.

²⁴⁶ “And I [Jesus] will give them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” John 10:28.

*reunited with it.*²⁴⁷ This reunion is the "making alive" of 1 Corinthians 15:22f.,²⁴⁸ a term meaning to place beyond the power of death.²⁴⁹ It is therefore unconditional because God's promise is unconditional.

But as we shall see, this "sleep" which seems to intervene does not actually involve the slightest delay in the experience of the departing saint with respect to his entering joyously and consciously into his Lord's presence: for he is at once united with his own glorified and resurrected body and so made truly a whole person *instantly*. There is no waiting, for there is no passage of *time* on that side of Jordan. It is only as an accommodation to our present time-bound consciousness that this interim is spoken of as "sleep." How else could Scripture have revealed what happens in the transition out of time into eternity?

I am convinced that this is the prospect for the believer. There *is* no loss of consciousness because the spirit is never left without its appropriate body, and our mortal state is, as soon as we depart this life, exchanged at once for an unconditional immortality. As we shall see, not merely the simple logic by which a number of apparently contradictory statements in Scripture can be beautifully reconciled, but the nature of *eternity* as distinct from *time* guarantees that the spirit is not actually introduced "unclothed" into the Lord's presence, but clothed in a body like His. For each departing saint, this departure from the earthly body means immediate union with the heavenly body.

The death of the saint thus signals *for him* the return of the Lord, that point in experience when He promised He would come again to receive us unto Himself

²⁴⁷ This was the whole import of the Lord's assurance to Mary and Martha with respect to Lazarus. It was with the promise of his being resurrected at the last day that He tried to comfort them, but at that moment their grief could only be satisfied with his immediate restoration: "Jesus said to her [Martha], Your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? She said to him, Yes, Lord: I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who should come into the world." John 11:23-27.

²⁴⁸ "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming." 1 Corinthians 15:21-23.

²⁴⁹ It is *this* sense that Christ, as a Man, was the "firstfruits" — the first *man* to be lifted from the "not needing to die" category into this "impossible to die" category (1 Corinthians 15:23). The Lord was by no means the first one to be raised from the dead, but He was the first to be placed beyond the power of death.

(John 14:3²⁵⁰). It marks, in fact, "that last day" for the departing believer; and I think it must also mark the last (but fearful) day for the unbeliever as well. The death of the believer carries that happy soul instantly forward with all other saints to the Great Day of his coming to earth in triumph. If this seems a difficult concept, I agree! But as we shall see in the final three chapters, it can be approached by more gradual steps in such a way as to be entirely conceivable and wonderfully agreeable to many passages of Scripture which appear in an entirely new light.

The resurrection and transformation of the body into a state of perfection appropriate to the perfected spirit is the climax of the Plan of Redemption. Regeneration of the spirit in this life is only the beginning of that process.

Let us now test this hypothesis by examining the data supplied by Scripture on this subject.

➡ PROCEED



²⁵⁰ “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and *receive you unto myself*; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:3.) Yet Peter assures the believer that “the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory *at the appearing of Jesus Christ*” (I Peter 1:7) which, being at the end of time, seems to contradict the assurance given in John. Then surely the answer is that both events — the dying of the saint and the appearing of Christ — are *one* event!