



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

Death and Immortality

What Does the Bible Say?



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Consider four major concepts about human beings in relation to death and the hereafter:

1. Humans are spiritual beings destined for a succession of future lives by reincarnation.
2. Humans are mere animals destined for oblivion, with no hope for more life after death.
3. Humans have mortal bodies whose immortal souls go either to heaven or hell when they die.
4. Humans are mortal beings who will die and be resurrected either to eternal life or to eternal destruction.

In the schools of religion and philosophy, each of these has its teachers and adherents.

The first concept, reincarnation, teaches that humans take on bodies of either a higher or lower life form at death, depending on the quality of their previous life. Reincarnation has a long history in eastern religions and has grown in the West through the influence of New Age thinking. Since its support lies outside the Bible, we will give it no further consideration here.

The second concept, no further existence after death, is heard from those who reject the notion of a personal God and a future day of rewards and punishments for His creatures. Characteristic of metaphysical naturalism, this is the creed of the dead end: We live once; we die. That's all.

The third concept, natural immortality

or immortality of the soul, is widely believed in Christianity. Immortality, they say, is a natural human attribute, and people's souls go directly to heaven or to eternal hell when their bodies die. Physical death is merely a transition from one kind of life to another in the hereafter.

Immortality of the soul is a belief attractive and strong enough to win the hearts, if not the minds, of most modern Christians. Yet the concept has some serious flaws. Before looking at a few texts often used to defend it, let's examine these flaws and the fourth concept — conditional immortality — listed above.

First Flaw

The first flaw in the theory of natural immortality is that it contradicts the Old Testament view of human nature and substitutes a concept popularized in the ancient pagan world.

The early Hebrews regarded the human body and soul as an indivisible unity.

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, KJV).

In this passage, to be human and alive means to exist bodily and consciously with the ability to act and interact with the created order. This bodily existence is physical and earthy, although it depends on the God-given spirit, or breath, for vitality.

Old Testament texts do not see physical (bodily) and spiritual existence as contrary to each other or as existing independently.

Rather, the word *soul* is used as a synonym for the whole person:

And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls (Exodus 1:5, KJV).

But the man that . . . forbeareth to keep the passover, even the same soul shall be cut off from among his people (Numbers 9:13, KJV).

Hebrew Scripture does not teach that the soul is a detachable part that can exist without the body. To die means to cease conscious existence. At death, the body returns to the dust, and the spirit (breath or life principle) returns to God who gave it.

Do not trust in princes, in mortal man, in whom there is no salvation. His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish (Psalm 146:3, 4).

For the living know they will die: but the dead do not know anything . . . Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6).

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

These scriptures give no support for the view that death is an instantaneous doorway through which a conscious soul enters heaven or hell. This popular view crept into the church with the influence of Greek philosophy early in the Christian era. Plato taught that reality is divided into material and spiritual categories, and that the spiritual (soul) has an invisible, eternal quality apart from the material (body).

Second Flaw

Next, the theory of natural immortality stands in direct conflict with three key teachings of the Christian faith:

- the second coming of Christ to earth;
- the resurrection of the dead from their graves;
- the great Judgment Day for all people.

If the immortal soul teaching were true, these three promises of the gospel would be meaningless. Here's why.

- If souls of the righteous go to be with the Lord in heaven when their bodies die, and if the final reward of the righteous is heaven, then the primary purpose of the Lord in coming back for His people has already been accomplished. Why would He come back to receive His people unto Himself (John 14:1-3) if they are already with Him in heaven since the moment of death?
- If the immortal souls of the righteous dead already enjoy eternal life, then the primary purpose of the body's resurrection has already been attained. Why should the dead be raised from their graves (1 Corinthians 15:52) if they already enjoy the full presence of God in heaven?
- If the righteous dead are now with the Lord and the wicked dead are now in hell, then the primary purpose of a great Judgment Day to come is already achieved (Matthew 25:31-33). Why should Christ call the righteous or sinners to judgment at His return if they already experience eternal reward or punishment?

While secondary purposes for these three eschatological events have been suggested, the fact remains that their primary purpose would be removed by natural immortality. This is its second great flaw.

Better Answer

Faced with these glaring weaknesses in the theory of natural immortality, Bible students should consider the merits of the fourth concept listed above. This view holds that humanity has no certain hope for the hereafter — a beautiful life after death — except through the truth of Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and return to raise the dead and grant them immortality. This concept rests on firm pillars of revealed truth.

Only God has the inherent attribute of immortality.

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords; who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen (1 Timothy 6:15b, 16).

God created Adam and Eve as mortals, subject to death. In Genesis 3:22 the Lord God expresses concern lest "the man . . . put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever." Adam and Eve would have had to eat of the Tree of Life to become immortal. Both before and after sin was introduced, humans were not innately immortal.

The term *immortal soul* never occurs in Scripture. In addition, persons are never

referred to as immortal except as a result of the resurrection to come. Neither our bodies nor our souls are ever spoken of as inherently immortal.

This is more than an argument from silence in Scripture. According to our Lord, both soul and body are capable of being destroyed: “Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). Since the soul can be destroyed, it is not naturally immortal.

In this life, humans remain “mortal man” (Psalm 146:3; 2 Corinthians 5:4). The whole tenor of the sacred text shows that humanity is on a natural course of mortality and death. Only God has immortality now.

Life and Death

According to the Scriptures, all persons will die once.¹

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19).

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

1. While giving this as the general rule, Scripture recognizes the exceptions in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thesalonians 4: those who are living when Christ returns.

Crucial to this point is the meaning of *die* and *death* in Scripture. Death is the opposite of life: When life ends, death begins:

In those days Hezekiah became mortally ill. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came to him and said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live'" (Isaiah 38:1).

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

From these texts we learn that life and death are mutually exclusive conditions. If you are dead, you are not alive,² and vice versa. The teaching of immortal souls contradicts this testimony. Denying that death is the absence of life makes death meaningless.

Other texts confirm that death is a state in which awareness and activity are no longer experienced. The dead neither plan nor work. They have no memory, knowledge, or emotion:

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol [the grave] where you are going (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish (Psalm 146:4).

2. One may, of course, be alive physically but dead spiritually, but that is not the issue being discussed here. Defining physical death as "separation from God" is an error commonly made in the popular view of death. This may be the definition of spiritual death in Scripture, but not of physical death.

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence (Psalm 115:17).

For there is no mention of You in death; in Sheol who will give You thanks? (Psalm 6:5).

Often, the Bible refers to death as sleep, and to resurrection as being awakened from sleep:

Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David (1 Kings 2:10).

He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep." . . . Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead" (John 11:11, 14).

After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:6).

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15).

[Jesus Christ] died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him (1 Thessalonians 5:10).

In using sleep as an analogy for death, these writers describe no continuation of human activity. They depict death much like

normal sleep in which we are unconscious, unaware of time's passage, and non-communicative. This agrees with the Old Testament descriptions of death in the foregoing texts.

Resurrection and Judgment

The Bible teaches that every human being who has died will be resurrected from the grave. Our resurrection is as certain as Jesus Christ's resurrection from the tomb after three days. At the future resurrection, the great divide between the righteous and the wicked will be clear for all to see.

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished (1 Corinthians 15:12-18).

"Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tomb shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28, 29).

At the resurrection, those who have received God's gracious gift of salvation through Jesus Christ will be changed into immortal beings suitable for God's eternal kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:50-57). But those who have continued in rejection of the gospel of Christ and persisted in their selfish, sinful lives will be destroyed, body and soul, in the lake of fire (Matthew 25:41). They will not live in torment forever.³

Most Christians accept this teaching about resurrection and the Day of Judgment. The crucial question is, "When?" When will the dead be raised? When will the righteous and the wicked be forever separated and assigned their rewards?

The Bible's answer is . . . at the Second Coming of Christ!

The following texts tie the resurrection and judgment of the dead with the return of the Lord to earth:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom . . . (2 Timothy 4:1).

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise

3. For a fuller discussion of the fate of the wicked, write for our free booklet *Will God Punish the Wicked Forever?*

first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him . . . in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:19-23, 52, NIV).

From these texts, two conclusions may be drawn: If there is no coming of the Lord, then there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, we are without hope — dead in our sins.

The blessed hope of Christians is not that we will someday die and go to heaven to be with the Lord. Our blessed hope is that we mortals will be changed to immortality at our Lord's return to earth: "looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13).

We have followed the Scriptures, then, to show that life beyond death is fully dependent on the gospel promises of Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead. We have no other clear promise for a future, endless life than these.

More and more Bible students are coming to recognize that Christ's grace and truth assure us, not of the innate immortality of our souls, but of the future transformation of our bodies and souls to immortality at the resurrection when Christ returns!

A Gift, Not a Natural Possession

Life's best possessions are gifts from God, and at the top of the list is eternal life. While not something we have naturally, eternal life is something God gives us, announced in the gospel. If we were born with immortal souls, eternal life would not depend on faith in Christ. Even failure to trust Christ would not cause us to perish, because immortal souls can never perish.

Immortality comes into light and into our experience only through the gospel:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

But now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (2 Timothy 1:10).

Jesus Christ, by His life, death, and resurrection, has given us our only hope of escaping a second death, of receiving perfect and everlasting life after death. These truths are headlined across the pages of Scripture: We will all die forever unless we receive the gift of God, which is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Before we summarize the case for the

natural mortality of humans and the promise of future resurrection to immortality, let's look at several texts that have been used to teach natural immortality now.

Spirits in Prison

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins

. . . being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing . . . (1 Peter 3:18-20a, KJV).

Some propose that this text refers to the activity of Jesus Christ in the hours following His death. They believe that Christ's spirit preached the gospel in the realms of the "dead" while His body was entombed for three days.

The details are important here. These verses say that it was *by the Spirit* that Christ preached to those who disobeyed — when Noah was building the ark. The preaching spoken of here was an act of the preexistent Christ through the Holy Spirit, accomplished through the mouth of the man Noah: "And did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly" (2 Peter 2:5). This preaching was an act of God's patience toward those ancient "spirits in now prison" — people bound by sin prior to the Flood.

There is no compelling reason to interpret

the passage as an out-of-body experience of the Lord during His burial or to suppose that He preached to conscious spirits in an underworld prison. We need not infer from this verse that Christ, during His time in the grave, led souls from hades into heaven forever. The reference to Noah's day is reasonable and does not involve the speculation of an alternate explanation.

Absent from the Body, Present with the Lord

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven; inasmuch as we, having put it on, shall not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge (2 Corinthians 5:1-5).

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better (Philippians 1:21-23).

These passages express Paul's anticipation of death and what that would mean in his relationship with the Lord. Although the

apostle uses language often interpreted as his expectation of being consciously with the Lord at the moment of his death, these two texts don't actually say that. Other texts lead us to better explanations.

Crucial to the understanding of both these texts is the Bible's regular reference to death as sleep. When one sleeps in the manner described in the Bible as death (no thoughts, no emotions, etc.), the passage of time is imperceptible.

Paul's words suggest that he did not expect some intermediate state of consciousness prior to the resurrection. Verse 3 of 2 Corinthians 5, especially, indicates his confidence that he would not be found "naked" — i.e., a soul without a body. As in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul anticipated that death would be "swallowed up by life" in the resurrection (15:52-55). He expected that his next waking moment would be in the presence of the Lord — spirit, soul, and body — at His coming (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Philippians 1:10). Paul taught that a resurrected body was not only *promised* for standing in the Lord's presence, but also *required*!

In the believer's experience, the next conscious moment after death is being "present with the Lord." Unaware of the passage of time, the dead have no knowledge of the wait between death and resurrection. Thus, the expectation of the apostle is firm and true.

We may be comforted that when we fall asleep (die) with faith in Christ, we will sleep safely in Jesus' love until the resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:14; Romans 14:8).

Souls Under the Altar

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9, 10).

In vision, John sees martyred souls under the altar, waiting for final judgment upon those who killed them. Suppose for a moment that a literal explanation of this text is correct. Then these souls are not in the glorious presence of the Lord above. Rather, they are loudly crying, in obvious discontent and pain. "How long, O Lord?" does not describe a happy scene of bliss for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. This could hardly be the literal experience of saints who have gone to joyfully be with the Lord in heaven. Instead, they are unresurrected, unrewarded, and unhappy.

This passage may better be understood in the same sense as Genesis 4:10, where the Lord says to Cain that "your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground." Just as the blood of Abel "cried out" from the ground, so the souls of the dead martyrs cry under the altar. The voices of these martyrs represent the longing of God's saints for the day when they will be rewarded and their persecutors will be punished. They obviously have not received their inheritance; they await the common time of reward for all saints, as expressed in Hebrews 11:40:

“because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” Revelation 6:9, 10, then, should be understood not literally but figuratively.

Rich Man and Lazarus

“Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame’” (Luke 16:22-24).

Not every detail of this parable should be taken as a direct teaching about death and the afterlife. Parables were given to teach a particular lesson. If this is a literal picture of heaven and hell, then

- rich men go to hell and poor beggars go to Abraham’s bosom;
- Abraham’s bosom is large enough to contain all the righteous;
- immaterial souls possess physical bodies with seeing eyes, reaching fingers, and thirsty tongues;
- heaven is not perfectly pleasant but close enough to hell for the residents to talk with those in the other place.

Jesus’ story is a parable about ultimate destiny and the choices we make in the here

and now that determine it. It was obviously not intended for use as a literal description of what people experience at death. The parable's particular lesson is to heed the conviction of God's word and repent. This is summed up in its closing lines: "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead'" (Luke 16:29-31).

Thief on the Cross

And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

It is commonly held that this statement of Christ to the repentant thief on the cross assures us they would both die and be together in God's presence (paradise) before that crucifixion day was done. But did Jesus go to paradise the day He died? No. Three days later on the morning after His resurrection, He told Mary that He had not yet ascended into heaven (paradise).

Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17).

The plainest truth about Jesus' time in the tomb is that He stayed put until the moment of resurrection, as this text says: "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the

Nazarene . . . this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:22-24).

The Lord's statement to the thief on the cross, then, was not an assurance of the exact *time* when they would experience paradise together but of the certain *fact* that it would happen. Since commas are not in the original text, the word *today* in Jesus' reply likely refers to the time He gave the promise and not to the time of their arrival in paradise. Thus, as the thief's request looks forward, asking that Jesus remember him when He comes again, Jesus' response emphasizes its present certainty: "Today I assure you that you will be with me in paradise."

Clear Teachings

Jesus' promise to return for His people is a solid basis on which to build our expectation of eternal life. That promise is sounded scores of times in the New Testament. The doctrine of our resurrection is repeated often in the clearest of terms. Our being raised from the grave to immortality is stated without equivocation. These are the truth pillars on which we rest our hope.

The theories of reincarnation and soul immortality, having originated in extra-biblical sources, can give no lasting comfort to those who know the Scriptures well. Little or no biblical evidence exists for these concepts. They are nothing compared to the solid

biblical evidence for the life, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ upon which our hope is built.

Our assurance of eternal life comes neither from idle speculations about reincarnation nor from ancient concepts of natural immortality. And it doesn't come from reports of near-death experiences in which some have floated through a tunnel toward a bright light, then returned.

Our confidence of immortality and eternal life for the righteous comes from the clear teachings of God's Word:

- When a man dies, he sleeps "in Jesus" until the resurrection. He is not aware of heaven or hell, of the passage of time, or of the struggles and triumphs of those yet living. He is not looking down on his unbelieving loved ones burning in hell.
- The experience of immortality and life in God's great eternity awaits Christ's return and the consummation of the ages, when the transforming power of His resurrection will be fully seen in us.
- We receive immortality and eternal life only as gifts of God in the gospel, through trusting Jesus Christ as Savior and obeying Him as Lord.



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