

Death, Immortality, and Heaven: No. 4

Although we may not find all the ultimate answers, let's consider some more questions about immortality, a subject probed by philosophers and priests, seers and scholars throughout history. To be mortal is to be subject or liable to death which involves disintegration. Immortality is deathlessness. No one has to inform us that the body is mortal, but what of the animating spirit within the physical body? Is each person born into this life immortal, that is, with "a never-dying soul to save" as we sometimes sing?

ARE WE BORN IMMORTAL?

Most believers, I assume, would give an emphatic "yes" to that question, but where are the texts that teach that? "The whole Bible," you may be thinking. Where specifically?

After Jesus arose and ascended to open the way into heaven, and while they were awaiting his return (the "parousia"), Paul wrote about that soon-coming event in 1 Corinthians 15. Describing a necessary change, he used a Hebrew parallelism: "*For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality*" (15:52-53). Question: Had they already attained immortality? Were they born with that imperishable nature? Yes or No?

To the Roman disciples Paul taught, "*.. to those who by patience and well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life*" (Rom. 2:6). Does he indicate that they were born with immortality? Was Paul saying that they had already inherited immortality and eternal life before seeking for it?

Much later, Paul pointed to the "parousia," "*the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ .. the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality ..*" (1 Tim. 6:14-16). Paul had also described Christ as being immortal (imperishable) in 1:17. Was Paul pointing to an exclusive nature of divinity, or something else? Was Paul meaning that God is immortal because he is Spirit but that man's fleshly, mortal body, which houses an immortal spirit, will be given immortality in the resurrection by making it a "spiritual body" still with fleshly characteristics? Is not "immortalized flesh" an oxymoron?

Was Paul actually writing about a raising and immortalizing of a physical body? My preconceptions in that direction long hindered my seeing his real teaching. My contorted interpretations actually made Paul contradict himself. It is true, "*It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body*" (v. 44). Yet, he had already explained in the paragraph that, when you sow a bare grain, it does not sprout into another grain, but into a different form and nature. So he concludes, "*Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable*" (v. 49-50). Would not the immortalizing of flesh and blood contradict what he wrote? Is it not the spirit that is immortalized in this change? Until this occurs, is the spirit not still perishable? "*Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed ... For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality*" (v.51-54).

HYMENAEOUS AND PHILETUS

Was Paul teaching that the flesh and blood and bones of the dead would actually rise in reconstituted form? Hymenaeus and Philetus were upsetting the faith of some disciples by teaching that the resurrection was past already in their time (2 Tim. 2:17-18). How could they get away with such teaching? Refutation of their claim would have been so simple. Just take those fellows to a tomb and show them the bones of the dead! End of debate! Don't you think Timothy would have thought of that? Why did not Paul suggest that? Is not the answer inescapable that Paul was not teaching and expecting that kind of resurrection? He was teaching the immortalizing of spirits rather than of bodies. If there were no bones in any tombs, then that would indicate that a physical resurrection had already occurred. The immortalizing Paul wrote about was yet to be accomplished at the then imminent return of Christ. But archaeologists are still finding the bones of ancient people long after the second coming of Christ with its accompanying resurrection. If there has been no resurrection, the deceased still sleep and heaven is vacant!

Since I have already disturbed you with provocative questions, I will ask some more that you may consider silly. Where does it indicate that physical defects like Jesus' scars will be remedied in the resurrection? In case of transplants, who will claim the transplanted organ? Might the heart of a wicked person inherit immortality in a saved person? If a woman dies during her pregnancy, will birth be finalized in the spiritual world? If she were a sinful person consigned to hell, what would become of her unborn child? If a man dies of a heart attack while eating steak, potatoes, and salad with wine, will those foods be immortalized? Tomato seed can germinate after going through our digestive system. Could those seed in his salad germinate and bear in heaven? The questions are endless -- though not immortal! :-) The questions are not all without answer, however, we must understand that it is the inward man rather than the outward man that is immortalized.

"The wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus Our Lord"(Rom. 6:23). Death and eternal life are set as opposites. In this setting, death is not physical death, for all die physically whether they have sinned or not. Sin is of the spiritual man, and it brings spiritual death. We must not try to make Paul state that the wages of sin is eternal life in unending torment. That would require immortality for the wicked --- immortality, deathlessness in agony. The wicked die. God spoke of the accountability of each person, declaring, *"The soul that sins shall die"* (Ezek. 18:4, 20). "Soul" may refer to a person or his spirit. Even the innocent die physically; so evidently this refers to the spirit -- that part of the person that is guilty. This passage does not hint of immortality in unending torment but of cessation of life in annihilation.

Scholars who have researched this subject far greater than I tell us the concept of inherent immortality came from Greek and Roman philosophy rather than from the Bible. Since the child is not born immortal, we would like to have been given a clearer view of its nature by inspiration. Does the aborted, the stillborn, and the baby who dies in infancy simply cease to exist? Or do they undergo change when dying so that they are then given immortality? That is our comforting hope. Assuming that a child is born immortal, if it grows into a wicked person, does it lose immortality so that when it dies physically, it dies without immortality because of its sin? Or is it an immortal sinful being existing unendingly?

Some assume that, since man was made in the image of God, the infant is born immortal like God. Because God is Spirit having no flesh and bones, must we not conclude that we are in his spiritual likeness? May we then assume that the child inherits other traits of God like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immutability, and incapability of being tempted? On what grounds can we choose the one trait of immortality?

Because the scriptures do not deal with the state of a new-born with definition, scholars have debated the matter for centuries. Some have taught that the infant inherits Adam's guilt. In an effort to safeguard against the loss of salvation of the baby who dies, infant (and fetus) baptism was introduced and practiced widely. Thus, baptismal regeneration was assumed to give immortality to the infant and also to the adult who had not been born again as an infant. Having gained immortality, the person was thought still to be vulnerable through sin to lose that immortality. That, however, involves a contradiction of terms for immortality precludes mortality. Can that which is deathless die?

Because of the fall of man in Adam, others look upon the infant as depraved and doomed except for the election of God who chooses certain ones to immortalize. It would follow that, since it is a choice and action of God which the recipient neither seeks nor resists, it is an irrevocable gift of immortality from the moment of God's action upon the person. That would mean that the individual is given immortality before physical death. Does that not contradict what Paul taught the Corinthians and Timothy?

Equating innocence due to undeveloped ability to think with immortality, it is also widely believed that the child dying in infancy is saved into eternal deathlessness. That seems logical, but where do the scriptures really teach that? The child that survives, however, is thought to reach "the age of accountability," indefinite as that stage may be. By sinning that person is thought to lose immortality because sin brings spiritual death. Death of the immortal -- a contradiction of terms? Then, a new birth is thought to be essential in order to regain immortality. Again, that attributes immortality before physical death contrary to Paul's teaching of a necessary change. That does not clear the confusion.

Nicodemus had been born physically into the kingdom of Israel, visually attested and marked by visible circumcision. Jesus told him he would have to change births, as it were, using the figure of an invisible, spiritual birth accomplished in baptism. Nicodemus was already a righteous man according to the Law, so this change was not to make him a righteous man but it was an initiation into the spiritual kingdom. His "new birth" was a testimony that he was accepting citizenship in the spiritual kingdom. As a righteous Israelite and a righteous disciple of Christ at the same time in those "last days," he would be given immortality in the change brought about at Christ's return. Neither physical nor spiritual circumcision had given him immortality. Jesus ascended to present his sacrifice on high, thus opening the way into heaven for righteous Israel and Jesus' firstfruits. So, at his return they were given immortality. Thus Nicodemus' figurative new birth and prospect of eternal life were promissory awaiting the culmination of the ages with the second coming of Jesus at the close of their age.

Rather than being an example for us, Nicodemus' case was unique. In that period of over-lap of old and new covenants, law and grace, the earthly kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of heaven, if Nicodemus lived and obeyed the gospel, he enjoyed the promise of both covenants! He was redeemed as one under the Law (Gal. 4:4-5) and one of the first-

fruits of Christ when Christ delivered “his own” at his coming at the end of “the last days” period.

Now that the way into heaven has been opened, cannot we also accept that figurative new birth and spiritual initiation evidenced by a spiritual circumcision (baptism -- see Col. 2:11-14)? And we can accept the prospect of eternal citizenship as promissory, with the Spirit as our guarantee, to be fulfilled when we die physically and are endowed with immortality? Paul affirmed this: *“In him you (Gentiles-ch) also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (at Cornelius’ conversion-ch) which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory”* (Eph. 1:13-14; cp. 2 Cor. 1:21-22).

Admittedly, this is a re-shuffling of the traditional deck. But who has been able to rightly claim a hand with all the trumps in our traditional theological shuffling? This is being presented to excite study which may modify conclusions. Maybe some thought given will help you clarify and fit together former perspectives that have been confusing.

When I was a child, an elderly neighbor on the adjoining farm raised some Spanish peanuts. Uncle Jimmy kept a pocket of his overalls full of the peanuts for snacking while working. With his hands busy in work, he would toss several unshelled peanuts into his mouth. To my childish amazement, he would begin manipulating with his tongue and teeth, puffing out hulls while chewing and swallowing the nuts. Few if any doctrinal theories are “clean-shelled.” As we busy ourselves in serving the Lord, we find it needful to extract the kernels of truth from the hulls in the process of gaining healthful teaching. And we may miss some kernels and swallow a few hulls. []

(Cecil Hook; October 2005, revised from July 2002)

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“I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).