

Will Flesh or Spirit Be Immortal?

This is intended to be a progression from previous lessons, so please read them first. We have been considering the developments that were predicted by Jesus and inspired writers for the last days. That period of the last days is identified as the period of about forty years from the ministry of Jesus to the destruction of Jerusalem bringing an end to the Jewish nationalism. It was an overlapping period of transition from the earthly kingdom to the spiritual kingdom. Among the imminent things to transpire in that period would be Jesus' second coming in victory over death. He would give spiritual life to the dead and deliver the kingdom to the Father. Thereafter, all those who serve him will be spared sleep in death in hades awaiting atonement, as had been the case of all previously. Since then, when the disciple dies physically, he is received immediately by God who confirms his eternal life with immortality.

Will the flesh be made immortal? The gift of eternal life is not to the physical man. There are many who, like Nicodemus, fail to discern that Jesus was speaking of the spiritual man. They cling to fleshly expectations. The physical resurrection of Jesus accommodated man's limited understanding about Jesus' overcoming spiritual death. He was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:15). His fleshly body did not become "spiritualized physically." Such an invented term or concept is contradictory.

But what of Jesus' risen body? It could be seen and touched. It could eat, stand, walk, and speak. At the same time he could appear, change his appearance to be unrecognizable, disappear, and ascend into the clouds. He told disciples that they would see him again, and that all would see his return. So, did he not have a physical body?

The Word was God (John 1:1). God is Spirit (John 4:21). The word became flesh (John 1:14). He emptied himself of his equal glory with God, being born in the likeness of man (Phil. 2:5-8). "He was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). As his hour came, he prayed, "Now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made" (John 17:5). "He was vindicated in the Spirit ... taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16). To manifest is to make visible, clear, known. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "No one has ever seen God; only the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18). Jesus' physical manifestations were to reveal the nature of God who is Spirit. In the spirit world we will need no such manifestations, and truly there will be none for, flesh cannot enter that world. Jesus' earthly body was left behind even as ours will be.

It is often proposed that Jesus will have that risen body in heaven and that ours will be like his with restored youthful perfection in an immortalized state. If that be true, then it will not be flawless for Jesus still had scars on his body. Will we still bear earth's scars and lack excised and amputated parts? Most of us are not too happy with the body we have and would not be too excited at the thought of spending an eternity in it.

John, the apostle, was very close with Jesus during his ministry. He certainly knew what he looked like in the flesh. However, John wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:3). If Jesus ascended in his risen body whom he had seen, John would have known what they would be like at his coming. But at his coming (parousia), he was not "seen" physically but his presence was "made known - comprehended."

All of us know that the fleshly body is mortal because people around us die each day. But it is likely that you were always taught, as I was, that the soul or spirit is immortal. We have sung of our "never-dying soul to save..," believing that if we do not make our soul worthy of heaven, it (we) will endure unending, never-dying torment in hell. Sorry, folks -- no, thank God, that is not taught in the Bible.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ; and this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:14-16). Immortality is deathlessness. Paul adds that Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

God told Adam and Eve, "the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). They ate and continued to live physically for many years. But they were alienated from God that very day. It was the spiritual being that was alienated, not the body. "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:20), not "The soul that sins shall live forever in hell." "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23). How could we ever have interpreted that to mean "the wages of sin is eternal life in unending torment"? When Jesus told Martha that those who believe in him would never die, he was not referring to physical death. The perishable soul would be given life and made imperishable when the body died.

You have probably heard the beautiful descriptions of heaven given by preachers. Some can paint it extravagantly in emotional oratory. But I am not sure where they get all their information. When you examine the Bible to find what actually is revealed of the next life, it may leave you a bit disturbed. Most of the descriptions rely on Revelation 21 and 22, but I am very doubtful that the descriptive allusions there are about heaven. At the climax of the last days, the old heaven and earth (the Jewish system with its temple and capital city) were shaken and displaced (Hebrews 12:18-29). That made way for the new heaven and new earth with its holy city, new Jerusalem, and the new temple as a dwelling place of God with men. Thus the spiritual kingdom (the church, those saved in Christ) is depicted in a living relationship with God in delightful allusions and figures in Revelation 21 and 22. The most appealing physical pictures of the richest, most artistic, and delightful surroundings are painted there. That describes our relationship with God now,

and it may also reveal the nature of heaven also. When we die bodily in this blessed state, we are

2.

made immortal in that eternal relationship with God. It is pictured in physical terms so we would have a frame of reference enabling us to comprehend it rather than because heaven is a physical place. We are not “marching to Zion,” as we sing, but we are living in Zion. So it is a literal description neither of our current relationship nor of heaven.

The people to whom the Scriptures were written thought the earth was flat, that the sun rose and set, that spirits inhabited high places and the sky, and that God’s throne was in one of the heavens above them, wherever they happened to live. Bible literature is filled with language accommodating man’s inadequate earthly concepts.

At funerals, the bereaved are comforted by reminders that the deceased had a mansion awaiting. Now, if each is to have a mansion, they will be lonely places! If it is to be enjoyed like an earthly mansion, who is to grow the food, prepare the meals, wash the dishes, pipe the water, do the plumbing, etc.? If the body is immortal, why would food be eaten, why have a digestive system, and how would it consume energy? The sexual instinct and marriage are earthly provisions for procreation and providing nurturing of offspring. Jesus said there will be no marrying in heaven (Matt. 22:30).

Parents anticipate a reunion with their immediate family in heaven. On earth each parent belonged to a different family. Their children shall have married and shall have had their own families. Each in-law will have been of other families that expect reunion, and this will prevail through succeeding generations. So just who will be in those family reunions?

If we are given a renewed physical body, we would expect that it be youthful. Mom and Dad would be unrecognizable to me, being my own age. So would all our forefathers be youthful. And what of my younger brother who died in his third year? Would he be a mature youth?

What sort of physical pleasure would thrill you endlessly? Would your capacity of appreciation for eating chocolate, playing golf, boating, reading, or singing be continuous eternally? Solomon observed, “All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Ecc. 1:8).

My aim here is not to create doubts about immortality or the glorious nature of heaven. My effort is to modify our expectations so as to anticipate a spiritual relationship of restoration to the very Presence of God rather than to have a glorified extension of earth’s physical life. But how could we have a hint of what that will be like without it being expressed in physical imagery adapted to our limited understanding?

Evidently, Paul was speaking of himself, perhaps alluding to the time of his stoning, as he reveals, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third

heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows--was caught up to Paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not

3.

permitted to tell” (2 Cor. 12:2-3 NIV). In this mysterious and tantalizing brief statement Paul makes us more aware of our lack of comprehension of what lies ahead for those redeemed in Christ.

Paul also wrote of the plan of God which was transpiring at the time and would project into the future: “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ -but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:6-9 NIV). That’s sort of like our little “peep-hole” in the door of heaven through which we see little detail.

In closing, we observe happily that no correct understanding of these matters is required for our entering into the life that God has prepared for those who love him. (Cecil Hook, May 2001) []

4.