

The Biblical Truth About the Immortal Soul

Ideas about us going to heaven or hell hinge on belief in the immortal soul, which must go somewhere when the body dies. Yet the Bible nowhere teaches the soul is immortal. So where did the idea originate?

Traditional beliefs about heaven and hell are based on an under-lying teaching—that everyone has an immortal soul that must go somewhere when physical life ends.

This belief isn't unique to traditional Christianity. "All religions affirm that there is an aspect of the human person that lives on after the physical life has ended" (*World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, Andrew Wilson, editor, 1995, p. 225). In other words, in general, all religions believe in some kind of immortal essence, a spirit that lives on separately after the physical body dies. Most professing Christians call this the immortal soul.

Failure to understand this subject correctly is a fundamental reason for the prevalent beliefs regarding heaven and hell. If an immortal quality exists in a human being, it must depart from the body when the body dies. The typical views of heaven and hell have as their foundation the belief in the immortal soul that leaves the body at death.

What does the Bible say about the existence of an immortal soul? Does this belief have a foundation in Scripture?

Not from the Bible but from Greek philosophy

Many are surprised to learn that the words "immortal" and "soul" appear together nowhere in the Bible. "Theologians frankly admit that the expression 'immortal soul' is not in the Bible but confidently state that Scripture *assumes* the immortality of every soul" (Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1994, p. 22, emphasis added throughout).

Considering how confidently theologians hold to this doctrine, it's quite surprising that such an important assumption is not spelled out in the Bible. If it isn't found in the Bible, where did the idea originate?

The *New Bible Dictionary* offers this background on the nonbiblical nature of the immortal-soul doctrine: "The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and they looked for the time when the soul would be free from its shackles. They conceived of life after death in terms of the immortality of the soul" (1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection").

According to this idea, the body goes to the grave at death and the soul continues to exist as a separate, conscious entity.

Belief in a separate soul and body was popular in ancient Greece and was taught by one of its most famous philosophers: "The immortality of the soul was a principal doctrine of the Greek philosopher, Plato ...In Plato's thinking, the soul ...was self-moving and indivisible ...It existed before the body which it inhabited, and which it would survive" (Fudge, p. 32).

When and how did the concept of the immortality of the soul enter the world of Christianity? The Old Testament does not teach it. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains: "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" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

The first-century Church did not hold to this belief either: "The doctrine is increasingly regarded as a *post-apostolic innovation*, not only unnecessary but positively harmful to proper biblical interpretation and understanding" (Fudge, p. 24).

If such an idea was not taught in the Church during the time of the apostles, how did it come to assume such an important place in Christian doctrine?

Several authorities recognize that the teachings of Plato and other Greek philosophers have profoundly influenced Christianity. History and religious studies professor Jeffrey Russell states, "The unbiblical idea of immortality did not die but even flourished, because theologians ...admired Greek philosophy [and] found support there for the notion of the immortal soul" (*A History of Heaven*, 1997, p. 79).

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, in its article on death, states that "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...No biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death" (1962, Vol. 1, p. 802, "Death").

Should we then accept a teaching that is not found in the Bible? Many people take it for granted that their beliefs are based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and God's Word. Yet Jesus said in a prayer to His Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Does God give men the liberty to draw from the world's philosophers and incorporate their beliefs into biblical teaching as though they were fact?

God inspired the apostle Peter to write, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter:1:20-21). We must look to the words of Christ, the prophets and the apostles in the Holy Scriptures if we are to understand the truth about the doctrine of the immortality of the soul or any other religious teaching.

Let's dig further to see exactly what the Bible tells us about the soul.

Soul in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew word most often translated into English as "soul" in the Bible is *nephesh*. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* succinctly defines this word as meaning "a breathing creature." When used in the Bible, *nephesh* does not mean a spirit entity or the spirit within a person. Rather, it usually means a physical, living, breathing creature. Occasionally it conveys a related meaning such as breath, life or person.

Surprising to many, this term *nephesh* is used to refer not just to human beings, but also to *animals*. For example, notice the account of the creation of sea life: "And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:21, King James Version). The Hebrew word translated "creature" in this verse is *nephesh*. In the biblical account, these particular "souls," creatures of the sea, were made before the first human beings were formed and given life.

The term is also applied to birds (verse 30) and land animals, including cattle and "creeping" creatures such as reptiles and insects (verse 24). It follows, then, if we make an argument for man possessing an immortal soul, animals must also have an immortal soul, since the same Hebrew word is used of man and animal alike. Yet no biblical scholars would seriously make such claims for animals. The truth is, the term *soul* refers to *any living creature*, whether man or beast—not to some separate, living essence temporarily inhabiting the body.

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a "soul" (Hebrew *nephesh*) more than 130 times. The first place we find *nephesh* in reference to mankind is in the second chapter of Genesis: "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" (verse 7, KJV).

The word translated "soul" in this verse is again the Hebrew word *nephesh* . Other translations of the Bible state that man became a living "being" or "person." This verse does not say that Adam *had* an immortal soul; rather it says that God breathed into Adam the "breath of life," and Adam *became* a living soul. At the end of his days, when the breath of life left Adam, he died and returned to dust.

The Old Testament plainly teaches that the soul dies. God told Adam and Eve, two "living souls," that they would "surely die" if they disobeyed Him (Genesis 2:17). God also told Adam that He had taken him from the dust of the earth and he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19).

Among the plainer statements in the Bible about what happens to the soul at death are Ezekiel 18:4 and 18:20. Both passages clearly state that "the soul who sins *shall die*." Again, the word for "soul" here is *nephesh*. In fact, this same word was even used of corpses—dead bodies (see Leviticus 22:4; Numbers 5:2; 6:11; 9:6-10).

Not only do all these scriptures show that the soul indeed can and does die, but the soul is identified as a *physical* being—not a separate spirit entity with existence independent of its physical host.

The Scriptures tell us that the dead have no consciousness: "For the living know that they will die; but the dead *know nothing*" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They are not conscious in some other state or place (see "Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep").

The New Testament teaching

The New Testament contains several statements confirming that the wicked who refuse to repent will die—permanently. In Matthew 7:13-14

, in exhorting His disciples to choose the way that leads to life, Jesus states that the end of those who do not choose life is *destruction*. He contrasts that path with the way of righteousness, telling us, "Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Jesus, moreover, made it quite clear that utter destruction includes both "soul and body" (Matthew 10:28), the Greek word for "soul" (*psyche* or *psuche*) referring to physical, conscious existence (see "Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?" beginning on page 8).

The apostle Paul also stated that the wicked will die. In Romans 6:20-21

he talks about those who were slaves of sin and says that for them "the end of those things is *death*." So those who are slaves of sin, who habitually commit sin, can *perish completely*. Yet many attempt to redefine death here and in other scriptural passages to mean merely separation from God.

Romans 6:23 is one of the best-known verses of the Bible. It plainly states, "For the wages of sin is *death*, but the *gift of God is eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord." Again, people will argue that death here means an eternal *life* of separation from God. Note, however, that *death* here is directly contrasted with *eternal life*. How, then, can death involve eternal existence through an immortal soul?

This verse plainly tells us two crucial truths. First, the punishment of the wicked is *death*, utter cessation of life, not a life of eternal suffering in another place (see also Philippians 3:18-19; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Second, we do not *already have* eternal life through a supposed immortal soul. Eternal life is something God must *give* us through our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul also tells us that *God alone* has immortality.

Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 6:8: "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction*; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap *eternal life*" (NIV). This tells us what happens to unrepentant sinners. Eventually they will reap destruction, referring to wasting away and perishing, but those who repent and obey God will ultimately receive eternal life.

No conscious afterlife without a resurrection

So is man an immortal soul? No. Does he *have* an immortal soul? No. The Bible declares plainly that man is temporary, of the dust of the earth. There is no immortal quality about man at all— unless and until he receives it from God through a resurrection, which means being brought back to life in a body, raised from the dead as Jesus was.

The Bible clearly states that man puts on immortality at the *resurrection* (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), not at the end of his physical life. Until that time man has no more permanence than animals.

Nor does man have some spiritual soul with conscious awareness independent of the physical body. This has been proven time and time again when individuals have gone into comas for weeks, months and sometimes years at a time, only to emerge from that comatose state with no memory or recollection of the passage of time.

If one had a soul that existed independently of the human body, wouldn't that soul have some memory of remaining aware during the months or years the body was unconscious? That would be powerful and logical proof of the existence of an independent soul within the human body—yet no one has ever reported any such thing, in spite of thousands of such occurrences.

This fact likewise supports what the Bible teaches—that *consciousness ceases at death*. Only through a resurrection to life will consciousness return.