

What Happens When We Die?

A Biblical View of Death and Resurrection

A study booklet to further the restoration of Biblical faith

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“Do not be astonished about this, for the time is coming when all who are in the graves will hear his voice and will come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have practiced evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28, 29).

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CHAPTER 1

Recovering the Biblical Perspective

IF CONTEMPORARY SECULAR SOCIETY has retained a flicker of interest in any department of religion, it is surely in the question of life after death—if only to provide answers for inquiring youngsters. Faith in the reality of life beyond the grave seems to be faltering, since an article in the *NOW* magazine of December, 1979 quoted the astonishing statistic that 50% of those who claim to be Christians and churchgoing members of the Church of England do not believe in an afterlife! And yet, in New Testament terms, Christianity without a belief in the afterlife represents an absurd contradiction. Indeed, the tendency to doubt the future resurrection of the faithful called forth some of Paul's most forceful words. To the church at Corinth he wrote: First and foremost, I handed on to you the facts which had been imparted to me: that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day, according to the Scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter] and afterwards to the Twelve. Then he appeared to James, and afterwards to all the apostles.

In the end he appeared even to me... This is what we all proclaim, and this is what you believed.

Now if this is what we proclaim, that Christ was raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there be no resurrection, then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so is your faith; and we turn out to be lying witnesses for God, because we bore witness that he raised Christ to life, whereas, if the dead are not raised, he did not raise him. For if the dead are not raised, it follows that Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing in it and you are still in your old state of sin. It follows also that those who have died within Christ's fellowship are utterly lost.

If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope, we of all men are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:3-8, 11-19, NEB).

It is undeniable that this passage contains a ring of authority and a weight of conviction sadly lacking in much of contemporary theological writing. For the early Christians, it was the absolute validity of the fact of Christ's having appeared alive after his death to reliable witnesses that formed the very basis of their faith. To suggest that Christ had not been resurrected would have been to render the entire Christian venture pointless.

Equally serious was the implied accusation that the apostles were propagating a dangerous falsehood. For the resurrection of Christ, as an unimpeachable historical fact witnessed by those who "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41), provided the guarantee that Christ's followers would also live again after death, or indeed escape death entirely, should they survive until Christ returned. Thus for Paul, the idea of Christianity without the past fact of Christ's resurrection and the future fact of the resurrection of the faithful would have been the

ultimate absurdity. All the New Testament writers share this unshakable conviction.

In the minds of the New Testament writers, belief in life after death was inextricably bound up with a doctrine of “last things” (eschatology) which is now quite unfamiliar to the average churchgoer. The eminent New Testament scholar, J.A.T.

Robinson, states that the New Testament eschatological scheme has “simply been silently dismissed without so much as a serious protest from within the ecclesiastical camp...For contemporary thought today the Christian doctrine of the last things is dead, and no one has even bothered to bury it” (In the End God, p. 27).

This is an astonishing admission. It is tantamount to saying that an essential element of the original faith has been dropped, and no one seems even to have noticed its loss! The fact is that Apostolic Christianity, without its very distinctive doctrine of the “end times,” is unrecognizable. The whole New Testament strains towards the moment when Christ will return in history to establish his Kingdom on earth. Contemporary religion, if it looks forward to anything at all, expects the believer to experience an immediate presence in heaven at the moment of death.

A serious distortion of New Testament Christianity occurs when the central doctrine of resurrection at “the end” is ousted in favor of personal survival in the so-called “intermediate state.”

For resurrection is the major premise of Christianity. The uniqueness of the faith lies in the absolute importance it attaches to the resurrection. We are here at the crux of the problem presented by contemporary views of the future life. The question which teachers and preachers of Scripture must take seriously is how far we have abandoned the Biblical doctrine of resurrection.

It must be admitted that our traditional notion of “going to heaven when you die” maintains only a tenuous link with resurrection, if in fact it does not render it entirely superfluous.

It is the purpose of this study to show that the New Testament presents an essentially simple and consistent teaching about life after death within the context of the related teaching of the return of Christ (the Parousia). To separate these two topics is impossible in New Testament terms, and failure to see the connection between them inevitably leads to a misunderstanding of the early Christian view.

To put the matter in straightforward terms, the New Testament offers the simple proposition that, in contrast to popular tradition, all the dead are actually dead, unconscious, “asleep,” awaiting a resurrection to life to occur at a specific moment of future history. Traditional theology has substituted an individual eschatology for the corporate eschatology of the New Testament and, by emphasizing the moment of death, has rendered the central New Testament doctrine of the resurrection almost redundant. For if the faithful departed are now “in heaven” with Christ, what possible meaning could there be in their future resurrection from the grave? And if the wicked dead are already being punished, what point is there in a future resurrection to judgment? The New Testament does not have to face these problems. It deals only with an “awakening” to resurrection

life as a corporate experience, in which all the faithful dead from Old Testament and New Testament times participate at the same moment of future time. The New Testament in fact teaches two resurrections. The first involves the Christian dead only, to occur at the return of Christ. The second includes all “the rest of the dead” at the close of the millennium (Rev. 20:1-6; 1 Cor. 15:23).

Regrettably the New Testament has been read, and continues to be read, with a totally different scheme in mind. Influenced by the unquestioned assumption that man is a combination of body and separable conscious soul, the average reader tries to superimpose upon the New Testament documents the popular non-Biblical idea that the dead are at the moment of death immediately conscious in heaven or hell. Yet, amazingly, as J.A.T. Robinson correctly states: “In the Bible, heaven is nowhere the destination of the dying” (In the End God, p. 105).

In recapturing the original Christian outlook on death and the doctrine of “last things,” the student of the New Testament will be enabled to participate more directly in the apostolic mind, which the New Testament teaches us to recognize as the mind of Christ himself. Indeed it is only reasonable to suppose that Paul’s writings represent the authentic Christian view, if only because many of Christ’s own disciples were Paul’s contemporaries and he could have verified his teachings on the subject in consultation with them. In establishing the New Testament point of view, the proper emphasis will be restored to the resurrection at the Parousia (second coming), this perspective having been all but obliterated by the traditional belief.

It will be worth quoting further from John Robinson’s book, *In the End God*, in support of the general proposition thus far advanced, that the New Testament outlook on the state of the dead and of “last things” is at total variance with contemporary belief. Somehow this fact has not reached the pulpit, much less the pew (at least in the Church of England), though writers on New Testament theology make the situation quite clear: The interest of modern man in Christian eschatology, if he has any interest at all, centres on the fact and moment of death. He wants to know whether he will survive it, and in what form; he wants to know what he is to expect “on the other side,” what heaven will be like, whether there is such a place as hell, and so on. But it comes as a shock to realize how foreign is this perspective, which we take for granted, to the whole New Testament picture, upon which Christianity is supposedly based (In the End God, p. 42).

The reader will perhaps agree that this is a fair statement of his own experience. I recall as a child being told of my grandfather’s death. I well remember thinking at the time that Grandfather must now be “in heaven.” Little did I know that I had accepted popular thinking on the matter, but certainly not first-century Christian teaching.

The significance of Dr. Robinson’s words, “on which Christianity is supposedly based,” cannot be overestimated, for they hint at the remarkable fact that traditional thinking and New Testament teaching are poles apart, and on a matter so fundamental to the whole of Christianity. What, then, is the New Testament position?

For in the New Testament, the point around which hope and interest revolve is not the moment of death at all, but the day of the Parousia, or the appearance of Christ in the glory of his Kingdom...The centre of interest and expectation continued, right through the New Testament, to be focused upon the day of the Son of man and the triumph of his Kingdom in a renovated earth. It was the reign of the Lord Jesus with all his saints that engaged the thoughts and prayers of Christians, not their own prospect beyond the grave. The hope was social, and it was historical.

But as early as the second century A.D. there began a shift in the centre of gravity which was to lead by the Middle Ages to a very different doctrine. Whereas in primitive Christian thinking the moment of the individual's decease was entirely subordinated to the great day of the Lord and the final judgment, in later thought it is the hour of death which becomes decisive (In the End God, pp. 42, 43, emphasis added).

The significant point is that the radical shift in thinking occurred almost as soon as the New Testament documents recording apostolic faith had been completed. The reason for the shift which in due course led to the "very different doctrine" has been rightly attributed by scholars to the introduction of Hellenic (i.e., Greek) ideas about the nature of the soul which run quite contrary to the Hebraic, Biblical views. It is essential for the contemporary student to realize that he has inherited, probably without question, the non-Biblical Hellenic view. If he wishes to base his faith on Christ and the apostles, this Hellenic view must go. Indeed, there are solemn warnings within the pages of the New Testament against the introduction of doctrinal ideas which would render worship vain, even though Christ and God remain the object of that worship: "In vain they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9); "You make the word of God of no effect by your tradition" (Matt. 15:6). It is the "many" who on the day of Christ's return will protest that they have been preaching in Christ's name only to discover that their work had never been recognized by Christ! "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? and in your name cast out demons? and in your name done many wonderful works?' And then I will profess to them, 'I never knew you: depart from me, you who work iniquity'" (Matt. 7:22, 23). One wonders if these uncomfortable warnings are being taken seriously.

The Biblical View of Immortality

The popular idea that good men go immediately upon death to heaven and bad men to "the other place" is founded on the Hellenic doctrine that man has an immortal soul, which cannot by definition be subject to death. In Biblical terms, however—and Scripture on this point is quite consistent from Genesis to Revelation—human beings are not immortal by nature. Indeed, the term "soul" is used as the equivalent of "living being" or "person," as subject to death. It would be truer to say that man is a soul, not that he has a soul.¹ Animals are also described as souls, and souls in general can be dead (Num. 6:6, original Hebrew). The following quotations will suffice by way of introduction to our subject to illustrate the point that in Hebraic thinking the soul is mortal and that immortality is possessed by God alone, and not inherently by man: Ezekiel 18:4, 20: "The

soul that sins, it shall die.”

Romans 2:7: “Those who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality.”

1 Timothy 6:15, 16: “The Lord of lords, who alone has immortality.”

2 Timothy 1:10: “Christ who has brought to light immortality through the gospel.”

Such teaching is, as J.A.T. Robinson says, “theologically commonplace but astonishingly unfamiliar...For it is still an almost universally cherished belief that the immortality of the soul is a tenet of the Christian faith, despite the fact that it rests on theological assumptions which are fundamentally at variance with the Biblical doctrine of God and man” (In the End God, p.

91, emphasis mine). Consistent with its view of the nature of man, the Bible describes the state of the dead in both Testaments in terms which a child would have no difficulty in grasping: Psalm 13:3: “Lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

Psalm 6:5: “For in death there is no remembrance of thee.”

Psalm 146:4: “Man’s breath goes forth, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.”

Ecclesiastes 9:5: “For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know nothing.”

In later Old Testament thought the doctrine of a resurrection emerges clearly, but it is always a resurrection of the dead (not of the living!) from the sleep of death, and it is an eschatological event, to occur at “the end”: Daniel 12:2: “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life,⁷ and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

The New Testament, having its roots in the Old Testament, asserts the same hope with greater emphasis: John 5:28, 29: “For the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good unto a resurrection of life, and they that have done evil unto a resurrection of judgment.”

1 Corinthians 15:22, 23: “In Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterwards they that are Christ’s at his coming.”

Entirely in harmony with this perspective are the New Testament statements about the present condition of Abraham, David, and indeed all the heroes of the Old Testament.

Hebrews 11:13, 14: “These all died [the Old Testament heroes of faith]...without having received the promises...that they without us should not be made perfect.”

Acts 2:29, 34: “David is both dead and buried...he has not ascended into heaven” (Peter). And by contrast with this statement, Hebrews 4:14: “Jesus, the Son of God, a great High Priest who has passed into the heavens.”

It is contrary to any natural understanding of the meaning of words that men who wrote thus could have believed that those heroes of the faith had already gone to their reward “in heaven.”

Indeed, Christ himself had said that “no man has ascended into heaven” (John 3:13).² According to the New Testament only Christ has yet been resurrected to become “the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20). The consistent message of the New Testament is that the dead are now “asleep,” a metaphor which most naturally (and euphemistically) means that they are for the time being unconscious, at rest, unaware of the passage of time, awaiting the great moment towards which the whole of the New Testament strains, when the dead are to be resurrected and “changed in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (1 Cor.

15:52).

The view of resurrection as an “awakening” from the sleep of death at a future time alone does justice to the writings of the New Testament, and it is the view founded upon the classic reference to resurrection in Daniel 12:2, where we have a description of the afterlife as “unconscious sleep followed by resurrection to joy or sorrow” (The Theology of St Paul, D.E.H.

Whiteley, p. 266). The Hellenic idea that the soul departs from the body at death is a flat contradiction of the Old and New Testament scheme, and its introduction into Christian thinking has led to the utmost confusion. For what sense can be made of a scheme which places each dying Christian immediately in heaven at death (although David “has not ascended into heaven”), only to have him raised from the grave with all his fellows at a future time? An attempt to reconcile the Hebraic and Hellenic systems has led to the idea of the resurrection of the body only, implying that the soul is already “alive.” But such language is quite unbiblical. The Scripture nowhere speaks of the resurrection of the body or the flesh. It speaks only of the resurrection of the dead. It is specifically said, as has been shown, that David himself, the whole person, is not in heaven, and that the dead, not their bodies only, are sleeping in the grave pending the resurrection (cf. the English word “cemetery” from the Greek *koimeterion*, “sleeping place”). It is the resurrection of dead people that the New Testament preaches, not the resurrection of dead bodies! “Most of the distortions and dissensions which have vexed the Church,” remarked a former Dean of York, “have arisen through the insistence of sects or sections of the Christian community upon using words which are not found in the New Testament” (quoted by Nigel Turner in *Christian Words*, p. viii).

The fullest account of the New Testament expectation of a future resurrection of the faithful dead, and the transformation of the faithful surviving until the Parousia, is laid out in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18: We want you not to remain in ignorance, brothers, about those who sleep in death; you should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; and so it will be for those who died as Christians; God will bring them to life with Jesus. For this we tell you as the Lord’s word: we who are left alive until the Lord comes shall not forestall those who have died; because at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel’s voice and God’s trumpet-call, the Lord himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead

will rise, then we who are left alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Console one another, then, with these words (NEB).

It is clear from this passage that Paul wishes the Thessalonians to understand that those who have already died will be at no disadvantage as compared with those alive until the Parousia.

But such a remark is hardly sensible on the presumption that Paul believed that the dead were already “in bliss” with Christ.

Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 15 he argues that unless there is to be a future resurrection, those who have died as Christians have perished. That is simply untrue if in fact the dead achieve immortality or consciousness in an intermediate state, apart from resurrection. Paul’s view is that only resurrection at the last day can confer immortality.

With these general considerations in mind we proceed to a closer examination of the Old Testament definition of the nature of man, and particularly the Old Testament use of the words “soul” and “spirit.” This will ensure that we later approach the New Testament holding definitions for those terms corresponding to the Hebrew thought world, and not alien definitions imported from the Greek Platonic system.

CHAPTER 2

The Biblical Doctrine of Man

IN INVITING THE READER to an examination of the Biblical doctrine of man, it is important that we emphasize how deeply entrenched is the notion that the essential personality of man resides in the “spirit” or “soul” which is temporarily housed in a physical body. Death will be seen as the transference of the conscious soul to another sphere. A typical parents’ guide to answering the questions of the young about “what happens when you die” will describe death as “moving house” to a new location; or the shedding of the encumbrance of this body so that the real person may escape; the graveyard will be seen as a coatroom in which our temporary clothing is discarded.

“What happens to you when you die?” asks a six-year-old, in *Questions Children Ask*, by Jeremie Hughes, wife of a Church of England vicar. Parents are counseled to reply, “When we die, we leave our bodies behind because they are now of no use to us.

And we take what’s really important, the real you and me, with us...our real selves go to heaven” (p. 47). No attempt is made to show how this could possibly have been what Jesus and the apostles taught.

The Platonic Barrier

Now while it is true that such language bears some affinity to a single passage in the New Testament (2 Cor. 5:1-8), it bears a much more striking resemblance to the language of Platonic philosophy; it proceeds in fact from a definition of man which lies quite outside the scope of the Biblical writers. Our familiar phrase about “keeping body and soul together” is commonly taken to reflect an authentically Christian view of death as separation of soul and body. But what is the source of such thinking? An examination of Scripture will show that the Biblical writers knew nothing of a separable conscious existence for the soul after it had left the body. In popular preaching, the words “soul” and “spirit” will often be used interchangeably to refer to that part of man which is supposed to survive death, carrying with it the real person still fully conscious, though without a body. But in speaking of death the New Testament does not confuse soul and spirit. Nor does it ever suggest that man can maintain a conscious existence apart from his body. The terms “soul” and “spirit” retain in the New Testament, generally speaking, the meanings assigned to them by the Old Testament (though “spirit” in the New Testament is more closely associated with the higher life imparted by “Holy Spirit”).

The Platonic view of the soul as the real man surviving death creates a constant barrier to any understanding of the genuinely Christian view of man. Moreover, the Greek concept seriously interferes with the central Biblical doctrine of the resurrection both of Jesus and of all the faithful. This fact has been, and continues to be, clearly stated by writers in theology, though their protest seems to go unheeded. Our attachment to traditional ways of thinking about man, especially in relation to death, makes it almost impossible for us to approach the subject openmindedly. Nevertheless, to arrive at the point of view shared by Jesus and the apostles we must lay aside the presuppositions so effectively inculcated by the post-New Testament Greek influence, and look afresh at the genuinely Biblical doctrine of man.

The distinguished Swiss theologian, Oscar Cullmann, refers to the “widespread mistake of attributing to primitive Christianity the Greek belief in the immortality of the soul” (Resurrection or Immortality, p. 6). He speaks of the immortality of the soul as a widely accepted idea but “one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity.” “There is,” he says, “no point in attempting to hide this fact, or to veil it by reinterpreting the Christian faith.

This is something that should be discussed quite candidly” (Ibid., p. 15). With these observations we heartily agree. The American theologian G.E. Ladd states that to understand the Biblical hope for immortality we must first understand the Biblical view of man. This concept, he says, “stands in sharp contrast to the Greek view of man. One of the most influential Greek concepts of man stems from Platonic thought and has often had a strong influence on Christian theology. It is that man is a dualism of body and soul. The soul is immortal and ‘salvation’ means the flight of the soul at death to escape the burden of the phenomenal world and find fulfillment in the world of eternal reality.” In sharp contrast to this view of death, Dr. Ladd points out that “Paul never conceives of the salvation of the soul apart from the body...neither man’s soul nor spirit is viewed as an immortal part of man which survives death. The Biblical word ‘soul’ is practically synonymous with the personal pronoun. There is no thought of an immortal soul existing after

death” (I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, p. 45, emphasis mine).

The far-reaching effects of Greek philosophy on the Christian faith are described also by G.A.F. Knight in his book, *Law and Grace* (pp. 78, 19): Many people today, even believing people, are far from understanding the basis of their faith...quite unwittingly they depend upon the philosophy of the Greeks rather than upon the Word of God for an understanding of the world they live in! An instance of this is the prevailing belief amongst Christians in the immortality of the soul. Many believers despair of this world; they despair of any meaning in a world where suffering and frustration seem to rule.

And so they look for a release for their souls from the weight of the flesh, and they hope for an entry into “the world of the spirit,” as they call it, a place where their souls will find a blessedness they cannot discover in the flesh...The Old Testament, which was of course the Scriptures of the early church, has no word at all for the modern (or ancient Greek) idea of “soul.” We have no right to read this modern word into St Paul’s Greek word *psyche*, for by it he was not expressing what Plato had meant by the word; he was expressing what Isaiah and what Jesus meant by it...There is one thing sure we can say at this point and that is that the popular doctrine of the soul’s immortality cannot be traced back to a Biblical teaching (emphasis mine).

It remains an astonishing fact that the messages of comfort heard constantly at funeral services, in which the “souls of the departed” are said to be already “in heaven,” reaffirm a central tenet of Greek philosophy which cannot truthfully be called Christian at all!

The Biblical Concept of “Soul”

We proceed now to an examination of the Biblical concept of “soul.” It is our understanding of this term which will condition our understanding of the state of man in death.

The foundation of the Biblical anthropology is laid in Genesis 2:7: “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.” The creation of man is thus described in two stages.

The organized body, while still lifeless, is nevertheless “man”— man produced from the dust of the ground. We emphasize that while yet without animation, the creature is nonetheless man, the first Adam who is, as Paul puts it, “out of the earth, made of dust” (1 Cor. 15:47). When the breath of life is breathed into his nostrils, the man becomes an animated soul (*nephesh*). We meet here the fundamentally important Hebrew word *nephesh*— “soul”—as descriptive of man, “the living soul.” But we must note at once that *nephesh* in Genesis 1:20, 21, 24, 30 had already referred also to animals. The translators of our English versions have rendered us a disservice by concealing this fact. They were apparently so tied to the notion that the word “soul” must mean “immortal soul,” the possession of man alone, that they were unwilling to reveal that “soul” is the common attribute of man and animal alike. In Genesis 1:20 we find “the moving creature, even living soul” (*nephesh*). In verse 21, “every living soul [*nephesh*] that moves.” In verse 24, “let the earth bring forth the living soul [*nephesh*] after his kind”; and in verse 30, “and to every beast of

the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is living soul [nephesh].”

The Crucial Point

The crucial point we establish here is that neither man nor animals are bipartite creatures consisting of a body and a soul which can be separated and continue to exist. Both man and animals are souls, that is, conscious beings animated by the infusion of the divine breath of life. As living souls they may also be described as “having souls,” just as in English we may describe both man and animal as conscious beings or as having conscious being. In 23 passages of the Old Testament and one in the New Testament (Rev. 16:3), the Hebrew word nephesh, soul, or its equivalent Greek psuche, is used of animals. In every case “soul” is closely allied to the idea of animation, life. Thus in Leviticus 17:11, “the life [nephesh] of the flesh is in the blood,” literally, “the soul of the flesh is in the blood.”

The significant fact which emerges from this examination of the Hebrew concept of “soul” is that immortality is never for one moment associated with it. The creation of man in the image of God lifts him far above the animal in intelligence and moral discernment; but what he shares with the animal kingdom renders him prone to a similar death, for “man is like the beasts that perish” (Ps. 49:12); “a man has no preeminence over a beast: as the one dies, so dies the other. All are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Eccl. 3:19, 20). The writer of Ecclesiastes echoes the words of God to Adam: “Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return.” We should not be surprised, therefore, to find that the Hebrews speak quite naturally of a dead soul. “The soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4, 20). “There were souls who were defiled by the dead body [nephesh] of a man” (Lev. 21:11). We arrive here at a most useful definition of soul (nephesh), one which can be safely applied in a very large number of cases from Genesis to Revelation. For nephesh and its Greek equivalent psuche when applied to man translate easily as “person.” The Biblical “soul” is essentially the individual, either a living person (soul) or a dead person (soul). In confirmation of this central fact of the Biblical languages we appeal to the distinguished British scholar Nigel Turner, author of *Christian Words* (T&T Clark).

He deals with the New Testament Greek equivalent of the Hebrew nephesh: We must concede that the Biblical Greek psuche means “physical life”...Alongside this conception...there appears in Biblical Greek the meaning “person”...the life of man, his will, emotions, and above all the man as “self.” If a man gained all the world only to lose his psuche (soul), it represents a loss of himself—not a part of him.

When there were added to the church about 3000 psuchai (Acts 2:41), whole men were added. The fear coming upon every psuche was upon every person (Acts 2:43). Every psuche must be subject to the state (Rom. 13:1), and so throughout the New Testament (Acts 3:23; Rom. 2:9; 16:3; 1 Cor. 15:45; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:14; Rev.

16:3).

We may add to these texts Revelation 20:4 which speaks of the “souls” of those who had been beheaded. “Souls” in this passage does not mean “disembodied souls” as so often misread, but those persons who had been beheaded. In Revelation 20:4 they are seen being raised to life to serve with Christ in the millennial reign. “Psyche (soul) in Biblical Greek signifies what is characteristically human, the self...it is the personality, what we often call the ego...Emphasis is on the whole self...Mary’s psyche was the human personality of Mary...Jesus wants me to repose upon him the whole of my weary personality, the ego, the entire me (Matt. 11:29). Jesus gave his very self (psyche) for the sheep” (Christian Words, pp. 418-420). We are reminded here of the Old Testament prophecy that he would pour out his soul (nephesh)—himself—unto death.

Nigel Turner provides a gentle warning about the medieval and modern Christian misuse of the term “soul” to mean a separate faculty within us. He points out that this new definition owes its origin to pagan Greece and not to the Hebrew Old Testament. Dr. Turner has this to say: “The soul is often conceived by Christians as if it were imprisoned in the body, as Plato conceived it, and it is said by Christians to fly to God at death in much the same way that Jesus gave up his pneuma (spirit) when he died” (Christian Words, p. 421). Dr. Turner concludes by quoting Norman Snaith (Interpretation 1, 1947, p.

324): “Nowhere in the Bible is there any suggestion of an immortal soul which survives death.”

To approach the Scriptures with the foregone conclusion that the term “soul” is to be understood with Plato as an immortal part of man which sheds its physical home at death creates a fundamental confusion. It is not widely known that distinguished scholars have constantly protested against the quite unwarranted assumptions about the meaning of “soul” which continue to make a nonsense of the Biblical Christian definition of that term.

From a mass of materials on this subject now collated in the two volumes by Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* (Review and Herald, Washington, DC), we quote the remarks of Franz Delitzsch (1830-1890), a leading Hebraist: “There is nothing in all the Bible which implies a native immortality. From the Biblical point of view the soul can be put to death; it is mortal.” A distinguished American Episcopalian, Dr. J.D. McConnell, wrote, “Of the early Christians, those who were Greek brought to the new religion the Platonic idea that the soul was indestructible, and the Greek influence gained the domination in the early church. The Platonic doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul came to be accepted. The notion was withstood from the beginning as being subversive of the very existence of Christianity” (*The Evolution of Immortality*, 1901).

More recently Canon Goudge deplored the influence of Greek thought in Christianity with the statement that when the Greek and Roman mind came to dominate the church there occurred “a disaster from which the church has never recovered, either in doctrine or in practice” (“The Calling of the Jews,” *Collected Essays on Judaism and Christianity*, Shears and Sons, 1939).

“Spirit” in the Bible

We come now to the Biblical term “spirit.” From Genesis 2:7 we learn that the infusion of the breath of life into the man formed from the dust resulted in a living person, an animated being. It is clear that the breath of life imparts that vital spark of life which renders the man a living person or soul as opposed to a dead person or soul. The breath of life (ruach—spirit) is the common possession of man and animal, as we learn from Genesis 7:14, where “every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth after its kind, and every bird of every sort went into the ark to Noah, two and two of all flesh in which was the breath of life.”

The word “breath” here represents the important Hebrew word ruach. In verse 22 of the same chapter, the destruction of all life in the flood is summarized by the statement that “all in whose nostrils was the spirit of life died.” The common fate of man and beast is plainly described in Ecclesiastes 3:19: “For that which befalls the sons of men befalls the beasts; even one thing befalls them: as the one dies, so dies the other. They all have one breath so that a man has no preeminence over a beast; for all is vanity.

All go to one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.” At death, says the same writer, the spirit (ruach) of man and animal alike returns to God who gave it (Eccl. 3:20; 12:7).

The Psalmist shares the same view. Created beings in general come to a common end, for “God takes away their breath [ruach], they die, and return to their dust” (Ps. 104:29). The essence of the frailty of man lies for the Biblical writers in the fact that at death his breath (ruach) goes forth from him, he returns to the earth, and “in that very day his thoughts perish” (Ps. 146:4); for if God “gathers to himself man’s spirit and breath, all flesh shall perish together, and man shall turn again to the dust” (Job 34:14, 15).

The ruach of the Old Testament is the invisible vital force which animates the creation. It is the driving energy sustaining the function of brain and nervous system. When the ruach is withdrawn from the body, the creature dies and the divine force returns to the one who gave it. The creature becomes unconscious in death, since the ruach, the source of his sentient existence, has been removed. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the Biblical term “spirit” does not, any more than “soul,” contain the real personality capable of conscious existence apart from the body. The spirit is the life force creating animation. In the New Testament the spirit has, it is true, come to designate the seat of the higher divine life imparted by the Holy Spirit. As Nigel Turner says, pneuma and the adjective pneumatikos have reference to the spiritual side of our nature. “It is however almost impossible to detect whether in these sentences St. Paul refers to the believer’s own pneuma or to the Holy Spirit” (Christian Words, p. 427). Yet pneuma is still used in its original sense as life force in James 2:26: “The body without the spirit is dead.” It is appropriate, therefore, that death is described in two New Testament passages as the surrender of the spirit. Jesus said: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. And having said these things he expired” (Luke 23:46). And in Acts 7:59, 60, Stephen said: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And having said this he fell asleep.”³ We must be careful not to read into these passages the Greek notion that “spirit” here means the real person now existing consciously as a disembodied spirit.

To do so is to take a leap into the very different world of Greek philosophy. We are here at the very crux of the matter under discussion. The Biblical view is that Stephen fell asleep; he did not continue to live elsewhere.

He, Stephen, is still identified with the dead body, just as Jesus, the whole person, died when the divine life-giving spirit was withdrawn, surrendered with the view to its restoration at the later moment of resurrection. In resurrection the dead man arises from the grave where he is sleeping in the dust until the moment when he awakes (Dan. 12:2). Similarly, Lazarus had fallen asleep—the perfect tense making it quite clear that he had not only fallen asleep but remained in sleep until his resurrection; and since “Jesus had spoken of his death,” Lazarus was dead and remained dead until he was called forth to life from the tomb (John 11:11, 14, 43, 44).

We must emphasize that the departure of the spirit cannot mean that the man himself departs fully conscious to another location. To read the Scripture as if this were the meaning is simply to read into it the Greek notion of the soul as a conscious entity able to survive death. But reading into the Bible an alien Greek idea, which is incompatible with the Hebrew thinking, is to mix two opposing worlds of thought. The result can only be a confusion leading to the breakdown of communication between the apostles and ourselves; for by introducing our own traditional presuppositions into the Scriptural records, and supplying our own Greek definitions for key words like “soul” and “spirit,” we erect a most effective barrier against understanding the Bible.

We also deny the Biblical insistence upon the reality of death, and in the case of Jesus, his real death for our sins. Because we have always believed that man survives death as a conscious disembodied spirit, we assume that the New Testament writers intend to convey that idea to us in the two passages in which the spirit is said to return to God. And we are not deterred by the complete absence in Scripture of any reference to a man’s existing in the post-mortem state as a disembodied spirit.⁴ It comes as a shock to learn that in a single reference in the New Testament to a disembodied state in connection with death, the reference is to a condition which Paul shrinks from contemplating! We long to be clothed with a new body, he says, “so that we will not be found naked...we do not wish to be unclothed” (2 Cor. 5:3, 4). Our scholars are right to point out on the basis of this passage that “the notion of a disembodied spirit is repugnant to the Hebrew mind” (Alan Richardson, *Introduction to New Testament Theology*, p. 196, emphasis added). Yet that is precisely the state we often envisage for the dead, allowing the real hope—the resurrection of the whole man from death to life—to fall into insignificance. Any interference with the central doctrine of resurrection must be taken most seriously as a threat to the Scriptural view of our future. We must maintain at all costs the Biblical emphasis upon the corporate resurrection of all the faithful together at the return of Christ. For that great event the faithful wait in earnest expectation, while the faithful dead rest in their graves (Dan.

12:13).

CHAPTER 3

The Location and Condition of the Dead

IF THE INCONSISTENT TRANSLATION of nephesh or “soul” in the English versions obscures the fact that both animals and man possess a soul, an even more serious confusion was introduced by the indiscriminate use of the word “hell” to render two entirely different Biblical terms:⁵ one describing the location of all the dead and another meaning a place of future punishment for the wicked, i.e., “hell fire.” In the Old Testament the Hebrew word sheol (the Greek equivalent being hades), rendered as “hell,” “the grave,” “the pit,” designates the place to which all, both just and unjust, go at death. This location is described as being under the earth; for when Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were condemned to die, “the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their houses and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods. They and all that belonged to them went down alive into sheol and the earth closed upon them” (Num.

16:31, 32). There can be no doubt that according to the Old Testament all souls, good and bad alike, are consigned at death to sheol (hades), the world of the dead. The Psalmist asks: “What man is he that lives and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of sheol?” (Ps. 89:48). The same truth is expressed by David, speaking of Christ, that his soul—he himself—“should not be left in hades” (Ps. 16:10; Acts 2:27, 31). And Jacob, hearing of Joseph’s disappearance, refused to be comforted and said, “I will go down to sheol, to my son, mourning” (Gen. 37:35). In Isaiah 5:14 the prophet refers to sheol as enlarging itself to receive the dead who go down into it.

In Isaiah 14:11 the pomp of the king of Babylon and in verse 15 the king himself are brought down to sheol. There are other kings lying there in their tombs (v. 18).⁶ The same context refers to “carcasses” (v. 19), “burial” (v. 20), and the whole picture confirms what we find throughout the Bible, that sheol (hades) is the world of the dead—what we might accurately describe as “gravedom.” An interesting confirmation of this occurs in Revelation 20:13 where the dead in the sea are apparently distinguished from the dead in hades, the grave.

The Sleep of Death

The condition of the dead in sheol/hades is consistently described in Scripture as a state of sleep. Sheol is not a place of torment, for it contains both the wicked and the faithful. The Hebrew shachav (“sleep”) recurs again and again in the familiar expression that one who died “slept with his fathers” (1 Kings 2:10, etc.), i.e., that he joined his predecessors who were already sleeping. From this most telling phrase, so unlike our popular language about death as “passing on” or “going home,” we learn that the dead rest in unconsciousness. There is no hint that the real person was not asleep but fully alive elsewhere as a spirit!

From Psalm 6:5 we discover that “there is no remembrance of God in death”; from Ecclesiastes 9:5, that the dead “know nothing at all.” Psalm 13:3 speaks of the sleep of death, and Psalm 146:4 describes the process of death quite specifically: “In that very day man’s thoughts perish.” For “the

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

Daniel looks forward to the eschatological resurrection and sees the dead awaken from their sleep in the dust. It is not that the dead once fell asleep and immediately became conscious departed spirits destined to join their bodies at the resurrection.

Such an idea cannot possibly be forced into the Scriptural record, for Daniel 12:2 describes resurrection for us unmistakably as the revivification of those who are sleeping in the dust of the earth.

They are in the dust until they emerge to participate in the Life of the Age to Come.⁷ Precisely the same truth is taught in Job 14:11-15. Here Job contemplates the prospect of resurrection: “Man dies and wastes away; man gives up the spirit and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decays and dries up, so man lies down and rises not; until the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep. Oh that you would hide me in the grave, that you would keep me secret, until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me.

If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change comes. You will call, and I will answer you. You will have a desire to the work of your hands.”

The Raising of Lazarus

With the much greater emphasis on resurrection in the New Testament goes a parallel emphasis on sleep as the condition which precedes it. In Matthew 27:52 we read that “many bodies of the sleeping saints arose,” that is, the saints awoke from the sleep of death. In John 11:11, to which we have already referred briefly, the story of Lazarus gives us the clearest possible account of the “mechanics” of death from the Lord himself.

Jesus, in full knowledge of Lazarus’ death, says: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to awaken him.” Jesus, says John, “had spoken of Lazarus’ death,” though his disciples had taken his words to mean natural sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly: “Lazarus died.” The well-known account which follows describes how the Lord called forth the dead man from the tomb: “And he who had been dead came out, bound hands and feet with grave clothes.” To impose upon this matchless account the alien idea that Lazarus, the departed spirit, had been for four days fully conscious in another place, is surely a travesty of sound exegesis. The simplicity of the Hebrew notion of death as the cessation of life and the suspension of consciousness stands in sharp contrast to the Greek dualistic system which denies the reality of death by supposing that the real man has survived as a disembodied spirit. Acts 7:60 must similarly be preserved against the inroads of tradition which have often led us to divorce the personal pronoun from the real person! Stephen, it is said, committed his spirit to God, and he, Stephen, fell asleep.

The death of David is described quite unequivocally, for “he died and was buried, and his tomb is amongst us to this day” (Acts 2:29). “He fell asleep,” says Paul, “and was added to his fathers

[who themselves had died not receiving their promised reward—Heb. 11:13, 39], and he saw corruption” (Acts 13:36).

“David has not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:34).

We must here take issue with the attempts that have been made by commentators to insist that David did ascend to heaven in spirit but not in body! Such exegesis must amount to a flat contradiction of the apostle’s statement. Further consistent use of “sleep” as the description of the death condition is found in 2 Peter 3:4: “Since the fathers fell asleep”; 1 Thessalonians 4:13: The Christian dead are sleeping; 1 Corinthians 7:39: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband died [lit. ‘if he has fallen asleep’] she is free to be married.” In 1 Corinthians 11:30 many of the church members “are sleeping” (the present tense is significant), that is, “are dead.” In 1 Corinthians 15:6 some of those who had seen the Lord had fallen asleep. In 1 Corinthians 15:18, Paul states the necessity for a future resurrection by arguing that without it those who have died (fallen asleep) have perished. Such a contention is strong evidence indeed against Paul’s having entertained the idea that they were already alive!

Tyndale’s Protest

Our conclusion must be that the dead in both Old Testament and New Testament are dead, without distinction, awaiting life in the resurrection. Such a proposition is, in fact, the only one consonant with the idea of a future resurrection to judgment for the wicked. For what sense can there be in a present punishment for the wicked dead if in fact they are to be judged in the future?

This would be placing punishment before sentence. Equally, for the righteous, the notion of a present conscious bliss negates the whole New Testament insistence on the future resurrection which alone confers immortality. It was this important consideration that prompted William Tyndale, a staunch supporter (as was Wycliffe before him) of the view for which we are contending, to protest: “And ye [Roman Catholics], in putting departed souls in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. The true faith putteth the resurrection, which we be warned to look for every hour. The heathen philosophers, denying that, did put that the souls did ever live. And the Pope joineth the spiritual doctrine of Christ and the fleshly doctrine of philosophers together; things so contrary that they cannot agree, no more than the spirit and the flesh do in Christian men. And because the fleshly minded Pope consenteth unto heathen doctrines, therefore he corrupteth the Scriptures to establish it...and again if the souls be in heaven, tell me why they be not in as good case as the angels be? And then what cause is there of the resurrection?” (An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue, Book 4, ch. 2, pp. 180, 181). The same warning against the danger of reading Greek views of death into the Bible has come from many different theological camps. The evangelical scholar G.E. Ladd refers to the commonly held tenet that “when we die we go to heaven.”

“Such thinking,” he states, “popular as it is, is more an expression of Greek thought than of Biblical theology” (The Last Times, p. 29). It is our desire that this fact be widely recognized so

that traditions which have been absorbed from Greek philosophy may be rejected in favor of the Biblical teaching.

The Death of Jesus

The traditional notion of a separate conscious soul/spirit surviving death has nowhere wreaked more havoc on the Scriptural account than in the matter of the death of Jesus. It is not unusual to encounter analyses of the Lord's death in which it is proposed that his body went to the grave, his spirit to heaven, and his soul to hades. At this point one is bound to ask, Where was Jesus?

The question, however, would not have occurred to the Hebrew writers of the New Testament, for they did not approach the subject with the Greek presuppositions about the nature of man which have become so deeply ingrained in our theology. The Biblical fact is that Jesus died. He, Jesus, was in hades, the grave; we have already seen that "his soul" is the Hebraism for "himself." In Acts 2:27, Peter gives proof of the resurrection of Jesus by saying that "his soul was not left in hades, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption." The ordinary Hebrew parallelism confirms the equation of "his soul" with "Holy One."

The message is simply that Jesus was not left dead in the grave, as Peter goes on to explain. David, in the Psalms, foreseeing the resurrection of the Messiah, stated that his soul (he himself) was not abandoned to hades, the world of the dead, but was resurrected to life. This account of the death and resurrection of the indivisible personality of Jesus of Nazareth will help to clarify the reference in 1 Peter 3:19 to his having gone to preach to the spirits in prison. This preaching is said to have been accomplished by Christ when he was "made alive in the Spirit." This is clearly language descriptive of the resurrection state (John 5:21: "The Father raises the dead and makes them alive"; Rom. 8:11: "He who raised up the Christ will make your mortal bodies alive"; 1 Corinthians 15:22: "In Christ shall all be made alive"—resurrected). Thus it was that when newly resurrected from the dead, he announced this triumph to the spirits—here being most easily understood as the fallen angels of 2 Peter 2:4.8 The term "soul" used of the eight souls saved in the flood (1 Pet. 3:20) is a typical use of "soul" to designate, by contrast with "spirit," a human person. The confusion of these terms is due, we suggest, to the introduction of the foreign idea of man as surviving death as a disembodied spirit. This concept, so repugnant to the Hebrew mind, as Alan Richardson says, must be banished before we can approach the Scriptures in sympathy with the Biblical anthropology.

The Need for a Sound Biblical Doctrine of Man

Our purpose thus far has been to challenge the widespread view of man as innately immortal. Those holding this view will naturally see death as affecting the physical man only—the real self will not die: it will merely pass to a fully conscious existence on another plane. We contend that nothing like that sort of analysis of the future of man is found in Scripture. The Biblical hope is related exclusively to immortality as a gift to be conferred on mortal man through resurrection. The notion of innate immortality represents a dangerous interference with the Biblical doctrine of

resurrection, indeed with the whole divine plan for salvation. It is a little-known fact that experts from widely differing theological camps and spanning the whole history of Christianity have expressed the strongest support for the Biblical view of man as a complex unity. Yet traditional theology has so often been hampered by the all-pervasive influence of Augustinian Platonism. This intrusion of an alien metaphysic, must, we believe, be taken seriously. If Peter, the apostle, urges us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and if ignorance alienates us from God (Eph. 4:18), it cannot be right that the universally cherished belief in the immortality of the soul be allowed to persist as a tenet of the Christian faith. J.A.T.

Robinson says, "It rests on theological assumptions which are fundamentally at variance with the Biblical doctrine of man."⁹ When the Church of England produced its plan dedicated to the memory of William Temple, *Towards the Conversion of England* (1945), the following statement was made: "The inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for the believer in Christ as risen from the dead.

The choice is set before man here and now." B.F.C. Atkinson made his contribution to the debate when he wrote: "Both man and animals are souls; they are not bipartite creatures consisting of a soul and a body which can be separate and go on subsisting.

Their soul is the whole of them and comprises their body as well as their mental powers. They are spoken of as having soul, that is, conscious being" (*Life and Immortality*, p. 2).

It has for too long been accepted uncritically that the "intermediate state," with which it is customary to comfort the bereaved, fits naturally into the eschatological scheme of the Biblical writers. It comes as a shock to discover, on the authority not only of the Bible but so many authoritative commentators, that the notion of disembodied consciousness for man is quite out of harmony with Biblical thinking. This should deter us from teaching our children and preaching at funerals the present survival of the dead "beyond the skies." A former Regius Professor of theology warned us that the "Christian faith does not divide or oppose body and soul as corruptible and incorruptible parts of a hybrid nature. The whole man dies, as the whole Christ died, and the whole man will be raised 'in Christ' to life...The resurrection of Jesus was not an escape of soul from body. It was the raising up of one who died and was buried" (*The Belief of Christendom*, John Burnaby, p. 189). Such statements as these strike at the very root of a conscious intermediate condition between death and resurrection, for they affirm that man is simply dead and buried, albeit in Christ's safekeeping, awaiting a resurrection from the dead.

Other Biblical Scholars

Another prominent scholar, F.F. Bruce, is no less emphatic that the notion of disembodiment, upon which our idea of the intermediate state is founded, is unthinkable for Paul: Paul evidently could not contemplate immortality apart from resurrection; for him, a body of some kind was essential to personality. Our traditional thinking about the "never-dying" soul, which owes so much to our

Graeco-Roman heritage, makes it difficult for us to conceive of Paul's point of view...to be without a body of any kind would be a kind of spiritual nakedness or isolation from which his mind shrank...He could not conceive of conscious existence and communication with his environment in a disembodied state (Drew Lecture on Immortality, 1970, pp. 469-471).

It is a very singular fact that the one appearance in Scripture of the Greek term denoting disembodiment occurs in a context in which Paul makes clear his horror at such a condition. Yet we are apparently committed to a belief in just such a post-mortem state for the deceased. No doubt in our heart of hearts we share Paul's unwillingness to entertain seriously the idea of conscious existence without a body; but our creeds seem to require that the deceased be comforted immediately, even while the living remain in the flesh. The all-important question is whether we are thus perpetuating a traditional teaching which cannot be logically squared with the Biblical teaching about the nature of man and his future resurrection from the dead. The heart of the Biblical consolation for the dead lies not in a present disembodiment, but in a future resurrection to glory. What is needed is faith in the certainty of that coming event.

John Burnaby alludes also to the great danger of maintaining a concept which detracts from the resurrection dependent upon the return of Christ. Referring to the traditional intermediate state, he says, "This gives comfort to the individual facing death, and still more to those whom he leaves behind, which must be lacking in the simple expectation 'in the end.' But it is not easy to combine with resurrection. For if I can be with Christ without my body, to what purpose will be the new body when it comes?" (The Belief of Christendom, p. 192). Just so. In fact, his warnings are more than justified when one considers that the great event which marks the resurrection, the Parousia (second coming), has been tragically neglected in so much preaching. Could this possibly have happened if that event had been understood with the New Testament as the glorious moment when the dead first come consciously into the presence of Christ?

There are therefore two major difficulties in positing on the basis of Scripture a conscious intermediate state. The first is that the possibility of disembodiment has to be imported into Scripture. It is, as we have seen, alien to the hope of the New Testament writers who look for one grand climax to the Christian venture—resurrection of the whole man at the coming of Christ.

Secondly, the notion that at death the goal is achieved apart from resurrection at the Parousia reduces the resurrection to a mere appendix in the Christian eschatological scheme. The resurrection becoming thus an afterthought, the Parousia, and indeed the Kingdom to follow it, cease to have any real significance in the mind of the believer. Who will deny that the results of such an impoverished eschatological view are not easily recognizable in the churches today? It is surely not without significance that Paul's final words to Timothy involve a solemn declaration before God and the Lord Jesus Christ of his hope for the appearing and the Kingdom of Christ (2 Tim. 4:1).

That those events, including the resurrection of the dead, are the real center of interest in Biblical theology cannot be denied.

There must be no deflection of interest onto a supposed intermediate state.

It is the serpent's lie that "Thou shalt not surely die" which has bedeviled much of the discussion about the state of the dead.

The stark contrast between life and death has been blurred in such a way as to exclude the possibility of real death of personality. But death in the Bible is the cessation of conscious existence. The reversal of that dreadful state can only be accomplished by the resurrection of the dead to life! Any theology which does not maintain resurrection at the very heart of its message has lost contact with the Biblical revelation. The power of traditional theology to impose itself as the only reasonable view has meant that any idea which arises to challenge its supremacy appears as an unwanted intruder. The negation of the conscious intermediate state before the resurrection has come to be associated with the sectarian mind, and not with the mainstream churches.¹⁰ But are we right to reject an appeal for a return to Biblical thinking, especially when it is endorsed by so many distinguished expositors, including Wycliffe, Tyndale, and a host of other Biblical scholars?

CHAPTER 4

Popular Theology's Traditional Stronghold

A CLUSTER OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES is cited in support of a conclusion opposed to the one for which we are appealing.

A famous "proof text" is found in 2 Corinthians 5, where it is argued that Paul described death as being "absent from the body and at home with the Lord." Backed by Philippians 1:21-23, where Paul desired "to depart and be with Christ," and the remarks of Jesus to the thief on the cross, the case for an intermediate consciousness in heaven at the moment of death is often considered as settled. It is maintained that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus can only confirm that decision.

On the surface, certainly these passages might seem to support the Greek notion of disembodiment. But if resurrection is to be genuinely a resurrection from the dead (as the New Testament describes it) how can it also (according to the popular scheme) be the conferring of the spiritual body on already living departed persons? Would this really be a resurrection at all in terms of the Hebrew thinking? The traditional idea becomes even more perplexing when we see that the New Testament verb describing the act of resurrecting the dead is the ordinary word for "to awaken from sleep." What possible sense can be made of the waking up of already fully conscious spirits in possession of the beatific vision?

Serious Difficulties

The fact is, the average churchgoer has not given the matter much attention. His assumption is that what he has always believed must be based on the Bible. Yet attempts at squaring the traditional teaching with the New Testament run into serious difficulties, not the least of which is the conspicuous absence in the New Testament of any direct reference to the dead being now present with Christ in heaven. For while the New Testament constantly states that Jesus has “passed into the heavens” to sit at the right hand of the Father, no such thing is said of the dead.

They are always pictured as having fallen asleep and as remaining asleep until the resurrection; and the resurrection is invariably placed in the future at the return of Christ to establish his kingdom.

If the moment of death is made to coincide with the moment of resurrection, then each individual must be resurrected in isolation from the community of the faithful, and this is, of course, an impossible idea for the Biblical writers. For there is one moment of glory, and one only, to which all the New Testament writers look forward: the resurrection of all the faithful at the arrival of the Messiah in glory.

There can be no doubt that what Paul hoped to attain to was the resurrection of the dead, to coincide with the reappearance of Jesus at the end of the age: “If by any means I might attain to the resurrection from the dead...This one thing I do...I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus...For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like his glorious body” (Phil.

3:11-14, 20, 21).

This passage contains the three indispensable elements of Paul’s eschatological view: resurrection, second coming (the Lord from heaven), and a change of state from mortal to immortal. In complete agreement with the verses quoted, the great exposition of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 places the wakening of the dead in Christ at the second coming and equates this event with the moment when mortality is to be exchanged for immortality: 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...So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption...As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly...Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption...We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality...Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:22, 23, 42, 29, 50-54).

Irreconcilable Contradiction

We are bound to ask how this passage can possibly be reconciled with the popular concept that the departed dead are already in possession of immortality. Surely it is patently clear that it is resurrection alone which confers immortality. And resurrection is unquestionably placed “at his Coming,” at the last trump. It is then that the dead shall be raised, that is, “wakened,” “made alive.” Is it not clear beyond all question that the dead must remain in the grave till they are raised from it? There is no suggestion that resurrection means the reuniting of an already conscious spirit with its body; though certainly the creation of the new immortal beings must involve the infusion of spirit into the new body to produce “spiritual” persons. But the spirit is not the individual subsisting as a conscious personality apart from the body. Only after the resurrection would it be appropriate to refer to the transformed saints as immortal spirits. We are faced with an irreconcilable contradiction if the dead have already been made alive before the resurrection, for it is quite specifically stated that they are to be made alive at his Coming (v. 23).

In 1 Thessalonians 4, the question had arisen in the minds of the believers as to what would be the state of those Christians who had died before the expected return of Jesus. Now Paul could have so easily removed all anxiety by pointing out that the dead in Christ were already with him, having at the moment of death overcome the grave and passed to their reward in heaven.

It is well known that he says nothing of the sort. Rather, he reinforces the certainty that at the coming of Jesus “the dead in Christ”—those asleep (v. 14; cp. 1 Thess. 5:10)—will be resurrected and united with those who survive until the great day. The antidote to despair was thus the prospect of the resurrection at the return of Christ, not the consciousness of the dead in another location, of which intermediate state Paul says not one word.

Reluctance to Question Tradition

Such is our reluctance to question the accepted scheme that we have not taken seriously the remarks of New Testament scholars who, though they may not be so concerned with what we choose to believe, nevertheless make it clear that the New Testament writers pinned their entire hope on the second coming and the resurrection to occur at that time and not before. The important question is whether we have not tried to “jump the gun” in ascribing immortality to departed spirits apart from resurrection.

To do this we must begin with the assumption of an intermediate conscious state of the dead between death and the resurrection and then “find” it in the New Testament. A more scientific method would surely be to start with an open mind and test the received hypothesis against Scripture.

There are two passages in the New Testament which are supposed to provide solid evidence for Paul’s belief in the departed dead being immediately with Christ. But before examining these, we note the remarks of J.A.T. Robinson about 1 Corinthians 15 (quoted earlier), the resurrection chapter. His observations suggest that there has been some foul play in this matter of trying to square popular belief with Paul’s teaching.

This fact should arouse our suspicions, for it is clear that if the popular view does not accord with the Bible, we should expect just such evidence of unfair handling of the New Testament. He says, “The reading of 1 Corinthians 15 at funerals reinforces the impression that this chapter is about the moment of death; in fact it revolves around two points: the third day and the last day. The modern age tries to apply Paul’s language to a single resurrection thought of as following immediately upon death” (In the End God, p. 105). These facts are sufficient to show that this central passage (1 Cor. 15) has not been allowed its proper sense. It has been forced to lend support to an idea unknown to Paul.

There is evidence of similar mishandling in the other section of Scripture normally quoted in support of the popular view.

J.A.T. Robinson has this to say: “It is to 2 Corinthians 5:1-8 that the modern view, if it refers to Scripture at all, makes its appeal.

(‘We are willing rather to be at home with the Lord.’) This is commonly interpreted to mean, in clear opposition to 1 Corinthians 15, that our spiritual body is waiting for us to put on at the moment of death” (In the End God, p. 106). We refer again to John Robinson’s account of the “remarkable transformation which overtook Christian eschatology almost as soon as the ink of the New Testament was dry, and it affects the center of interest or pivotal point of the whole subject.” He contrasts the popular view of eschatology and notes “how foreign is this perspective, which we take for granted, to the whole New Testament picture upon which Christianity is supposedly based.

For in the New Testament the point around which hope and interest revolve is not the moment of death at all, but the appearance of Christ in the glory of his Kingdom” (In the End God, p. 42).

The Necessary Key to the Problem

This analysis by a leading New Testament scholar provides us with the necessary key to unraveling the perplexing discrepancy between the actual facts of the New Testament in regard to life after death and traditional thinking on the subject. The truth is that the popular scheme represents a “remarkable transformation” of the New Testament plan. It is “quite foreign” to the New Testament upon which Christianity is “supposedly based.” The only wise course is to face the unpalatable fact that these views are traditional, not Biblical. It is no exaggeration to say that the teachings of the apostles have been mishandled in an effort to find justification for a view of eschatology unknown to the writers of the New Testament. The all-important moment of the coming of Christ to establish his Kingdom has been replaced by the moment of the individual’s death. The common understanding of this matter is therefore not recognizably Christian by New Testament standards, and on a question so central to the faith! History shows, however, that rather than admit this, we persist with the illusion that a satisfactory compromise can be achieved between original Christianity and its later transformation. There is an unwillingness to disturb tradition. But such a compromise can only be attempted by a subtle change of language. For the

New Testament speaks only of the resurrection of dead people, who are to be raised to life at the return of Christ.

We speak—and our creeds reflect this—of the resurrection of the body, thus opening the way for the insertion of the belief that the conscious person, in a disembodied spirit form, has already gone to his reward in heaven, while his body alone awaits the resurrection at the last day. We attempt thus to preserve some significance for the future corporate resurrection, so clearly taught in the Bible, by maintaining that it is a resurrection of bodies only as distinct from real persons! The crucial question we have been considering is whether the New Testament countenances such a distinction between the body and a separable, fully conscious soul or spirit.

The inevitable result of the new “twist” which was given to eschatology is of course to move the center of interest away from the future resurrection to the moment of death, and in consequence—this is highly significant—away from the great event which the New Testament associates with the future resurrection—the second coming and the inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth. Quite clearly it is what happens to the conscious person after death which captures our interest, not what happens to his body. The transformed system—adopting alien Platonic ideas introduced principally at Alexandria in the third century—imposed upon the original faith the foreign (to the Hebrews) concept of the immortality of the soul. Scope was then available for placing the “departed soul” in conscious bliss at the moment of death. The whole idea of resurrection at a later time then became quite secondary, if not quite unnecessary. No more deadly blow could have been struck at the New Testament eschatological hope.

Unfair Handling of Scripture

The business of trying to read the popular system into the New Testament writings involves some very unfair handling of the two or three passages which stand the best chance of being accommodated to the traditional belief. For at all costs our beliefs must be backed by chapter and verse! To admit that this cannot be done within the laws of sound exegesis places us in the difficult position of having to concede that what we have been believing is not Christian. Faced with this dilemma, scholars of the “demythologizing” school claim that one eschatological system is as good as another. All are “myths,” and whether they are found inside or outside the New Testament they offer no divinely authoritative statement about what actually happens to us after death. However, for those who are convinced that Paul’s view owes its origin (as he himself claims) to the Spirit of Jesus, such an escape into agnosticism is not satisfactory at all; and at that point we are left with no course but to abandon the traditional view in favor of the safety of the original Christian teaching preserved in the New Testament. Church history shows that there has been an earnest minority within many denominational persuasions who have taken this course, while the mainstream has persisted with its traditions. The challenge to choose the apostolic faith over the later tradition faces each believer.

Justification for the almost universally held opinion that Christianity teaches that the dead are consciously with God at the instant of death is commonly based on Philippians 1:23. Paul here

finds himself torn between the desire to remain with the believers and his longing to depart to be with the Lord.

Corroboration of the received tradition is sought in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul there expresses the wish to be “absent from the body and present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Isolated from their immediate context and from the wider context of both Old and New Testaments as a whole, no doubt these verses can be made to bolster the popular view. A closer look will, however, show on what shaky ground the whole attempt rests. Firstly, it is undeniable that the New Testament everywhere strains towards the Parousia and the resurrection of the faithful which is consistently placed at the great day, as the collective resurrection of all the saints. Paul has a precise and simple system of resurrection: “In Christ shall all be made alive...those who belong to Christ at his Coming” (1 Cor. 15:23). In 1 Thessalonians 4 he offers comfort to the believers in connection with those Christians who are said to be sleeping, an extraordinary term to use if he thought they were already fully conscious in bliss with the Lord! There is no need for the surviving Christians to grieve because all will be reunited at the future resurrection. In a similar situation today the church would be consoled with claims that the dead are already alive with God.

The fact that Paul says nothing like this only goes to show the gulf between the two systems. For the contemporary churchgoer the future resurrection can at best be only an afterthought, all that is really decisive having, as he thinks, taken place at death.

What Does Paul Mean?

What then of Paul’s statement in Philippians 1:23 about departing to be with Christ? If this single verse is read without reference to 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4, and Paul’s subsequent remarks in the same letter (Phil. 3:11-21), it would be possible to gain the impression that Paul expected to be with Christ immediately at death. But this would be to contradict his whole thinking as we find it explained much more fully in the other passages. What Paul was really aiming for is fortunately clarified later in the same epistle: “if by any means I might attain to the resurrection...we look for the Savior, Jesus Christ, from heaven, who will transform our body of humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil. 3:11, 20). It is beyond question that he here knows of no goal other than the attainment of resurrection at the return of Christ. It would therefore be quite unfair to read his remarks about “departing to be with the Lord” as relating to a quite different aspiration, one not involving resurrection, and thus quite distinct from his desire for the last day. The popular belief implies that a Christian can be fully alive with Christ apart from the resurrection. This will mean that death is not really death in any real sense, but the continuation of life in another realm. At that point resurrection from the dead becomes meaningless! Paul, in fact, speaks in Philippians 1:23 simply of his departure to be with Christ through death and subsequent resurrection.¹¹ For the dying, their next second of consciousness will find them alive in the resurrection. Departure from this life will mean being with Christ at his Coming.

If we now consider his statement about being absent from the body and present with the Lord, we shall find that it, too, is set in a context which, because of its striking similarity to 1 Corinthians 15 (written only a year earlier), must refer also to a future resurrection, not to any imagined intermediate state following immediately upon death. This can be seen clearly from the general statement with which Paul prefaces his account of the Christian hope of attaining a “spiritual body”: “We believe, therefore we speak, knowing that he who raised up the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you...Therefore we faint not” (2 Cor. 4:14, 16). These remarks should warn us not to try to read into Paul’s following discussion ideas about a future state divorced from resurrection. There are three clear points of contact between 2 Corinthians 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, and when these are noted, it will be quite impossible to maintain that Paul is dealing with two different termini. The first feature common to both passages is the notion of being “clothed with immortality”: 2 Corinthians 5:2, 4: “For indeed we groan in this tabernacle, longing to be clothed with our dwelling which comes to us from heaven...We do not wish to be unclothed [i.e., disembodied], but to be clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up in life.”

We have exactly the same point being made in 1 Corinthians 15:54: “For it behooves this corruptible to be clothed with immortality...Then shall come to pass the word that has been written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” Secondly, common to both passages is the appearance of the Lord for salvation from (not in!) heaven: 2 Corinthians 5:2: “We are longing to be clothed with our dwelling which is from heaven.” 1 Corinthians 15:47: “The second man, Christ, is the Lord [arriving] from heaven.”

Thirdly, the idea of mortality being superseded by immortality: 2 Corinthians 5:4: “We wish to be clothed so that mortality may be swallowed up by life.” 1 Corinthians 15:54: “When this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the word that has been written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” These points of contact, involving the use of identical language, surely rule out any possibility that Paul has two entirely different events in mind—not least in view of the fact that he is writing to the same people, and within a short space of time. To take 2 Corinthians 5 as referring to the moment of death, to mean that each individual receives immortality independently at death is, as J.A.T. Robinson says, “to read the passage in clear opposition to 1 Corinthians 15” (In the End God, p. 106). The time has surely come to stop making Paul contradict himself and to acknowledge the remarkable consistency and unity which extend to all his writings on this central issue of life after death.

The Unity of the Pauline Eschatology

We may demonstrate more fully the unity of Paul’s thinking about the future life of believers by collating five relevant passages from Paul’s epistles in a composite version. This will serve to reinforce the impression we have already gained that he looked for a single goal—that of the resurrection of all the faithful at the Parousia. That moment is decisive for all the New Testament writers. The Pauline point of view can be traced as follows (emphasis calls attention to the unity of his thinking).

The fundamental tenet of Paul's future hope is stated thus: And having the same spirit of faith, as it is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke." We also believed, therefore we also speak, knowing that he who resurrected the Lord Jesus will resurrect us also and present us with you. Therefore we do not faint...We do not consider the visible things, but those not visible. For the visible things are temporary, but the invisible pertain to the Coming Age.

We know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle is destroyed, we have a house not made with hands fit for the [Coming] Age, in the heavens. For indeed we groan in this tabernacle, longing to be clothed with our dwelling which comes to us from heaven (2 Cor.

4:13-5:2). We are awaiting the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, from heaven (Phil. 3:20). The second man is the Lord from heaven (1 Cor.

15:47). We groan in ourselves, awaiting the redemption of our body.

The sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with the glory about to be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:23, 28, 29); if we suffer together, we shall also be glorified together (Rom.

8:17). When Christ our life is manifested, then you also shall be manifested with him in glory (Col. 3:4). We do not wish to be unclothed, but clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up in life (2 Cor. 5:4). We shall not all fall asleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (1 Cor.

15:51, 52); in Christ shall all be made alive, those that are Christ's at his coming (1 Cor. 15:23); the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. For it behooves this corruptible to be clothed with incorruptibility (1 Cor. 15:52, 53). The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we who remain until the coming of the Lord shall be caught away together to meet the Lord in the air; thus shall we always be with the Lord (1 Thess. 4:16, 17). We are confident and wishing rather to be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8); to die together and to live together (2 Cor. 7:3). I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23)...if by any means I may arrive at the resurrection of the dead (Phil. 3:11).

From these passages it will be seen that Paul expects to be with Christ at the resurrection, not before. The restoration of the Biblical scheme will resolve the unwarranted tensions which have been created by our efforts to superimpose the traditional belief on Scripture. Firstly, resurrection will mean a real transition of dead people from death to life, and that great future event will regain its central position in Christian thinking.

Secondly, the individual will be thought of as an indivisible unity, not as a soul deprived of its body at death. In this way the poison of Greek ideas may be purged from the contemporary Christian outlook. Thirdly, the intensity of the enthusiasm for the return of Christ, shared by all the New Testament writers, will be restored. The traditional emphasis on the moment of death, which is of no consequence to the New Testament writers, has most successfully dissipated that intensity

of expectation, so that the Biblical Christian view of the future is all but unknown in church circles. Finally, there will be no need to bend isolated verses of the New Testament to conform to a non-Biblical tradition.

A Detailed Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5

The theme treated by Paul is the prospect of resurrection for believers. He begins with a general statement of the topic he is about to consider: “He who raised up the Lord Jesus will raise us up also through Jesus and present us with you” (2 Cor. 4:14).

The argument proceeds on the basis of this central hope: “For this reason we do not faint” (v. 16). Paul then contrasts the temporary suffering we undergo in our present body with the glory of the resurrection life to be granted at the Parousia. There is a marked emphasis on a favorite Pauline theme: the contrast between the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4) and the Messianic age to come (1 Tim. 4:8). Our present tribulation is momentary and insignificant compared with the glory pertaining to the coming age (2 Cor. 4:17). (The Authorized Version’s “eternal,” from the Greek *aionios*, should be rendered “relating to the coming age,” *Christian Words*, p. 455.) The things now visible are temporary; the invisible things pertain to the coming age (v. 18). If our present earthly house (body) is destroyed in death, we have—the prospect is certain—a new body awaiting us. The new body is adapted to the life of the coming age (v. 11). We long to put it on when it comes with Christ from heaven (v. 2). We shall not then be found naked (i.e., in death; cp. the naked grain planted in the ground with a view to resurrection, 1 Cor. 15:37). We do not wish to be disembodied, but clothed with immortality at the resurrection when death is to be swallowed up in life (vv. 3, 4).

The Spirit is the earnest of the promised immortality (v. 5). We know that while we remain in our present bodies we are absent from the Lord (v. 6). Our desire is to leave our home in this body and take up our home with the Lord (v. 8); that is, to exchange our temporary body for the glorious body to be received at the Parousia; for we must all be manifested before the judgment seat of Christ when he comes (v. 10).

The whole argument concerns our condition now, as contrasted with then. The interval between the present and the Parousia is only relevant if one survives until the coming. The death state is dismissed by Paul, since, as F.F. Bruce says, “He could not conceive of conscious existence in a disembodied state” (Drew Lecture on Immortality, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 24, No. 4, p. 471). To survive as a disembodied spirit is the one thing he shrinks from!

Thus, while our traditional scheme is founded on the prospect of bodiless survival at the moment of death, Scripture makes a single reference to such a condition, and rejects it as unthinkable.

Our mistake is to read “absent from the body and present with the Lord” as if this meant “absent from the body and thus disembodied with the Lord.” If, however, we look elsewhere in Paul’s writings, we shall find that he expects to be with the Lord only through resurrection at the

Parousia (1 Thess. 4:17). For Paul, absence from the body means presence with the Lord in the new body. Taking up an abode with Christ (v. 8) obviously implies a condition of the body, for the whole passage is based upon abode, dwelling, and tent as figures of the body. Paul has in mind therefore the exchange of the old for the new. “In that day we shall indeed be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Union with Christ must await “that day.”

Philippians 1:21-23

When it is seen that the simple scheme of sleep followed by an awakening in resurrection alone does justice to the Biblical data (as well as being amply supported by the writings of early church history), Philippians 1:21-23 can hardly be taken to lend support to the notion of an immediate presence with Christ. Any problem posed by these verses is easily solved when it is understood that for those who fall asleep in death, the passage of time is of no consequence whatever. The believer who awakes in resurrection will have had no sense of the interval between death and resurrection.

In Philippians 1:23 Paul contemplates death for himself: “For me, to die is gain.” He thinks, naturally enough, of an immediate presence with Christ. For the dying man, the moment of closing his eyes in death will be instantly succeeded by the sound of the last trumpet. He will have experienced no interval between death and the resurrection which is his goal (Phil. 3:11). We must insist, however, with Oscar Cullmann, that the dead are still “in time” (*Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* p.

49); “otherwise,” as Cullmann adds, “the problem in 1 Thessalonians 4:13ff would have no meaning.” While the dead remain “within time,” for them there is no awareness of the interval from death to resurrection. In that sense, and only in that sense, the dying believer steps from this age into the Kingdom of God which arrives at the Parousia.

If contemporary believers shared with Paul his clarity of vision and faith in the future, there would be no temptation to read into his writings the notion of a conscious pre-resurrection state. For Paul, and for the early church, the resurrection to life at the Parousia is the only goal. It is then that he hopes to be “with the Lord,” and in 1 Thessalonians 4 he describes the event which will usher him into Christ’s presence—“and so we shall ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Some contemporary commentators, knowing that life as a disembodied spirit would have been inconceivable for Paul, are driven to the desperate expedient of suggesting that in 2 Corinthians 5 the apostle overthrew the entire eschatological scheme which he had received as a divine revelation in 1 Corinthians 15 only a short time earlier. They propose that in 2 Corinthians 5 he expected the new body at death and not at the Parousia. Such “solutions,” however, point rather to a desire to preserve at all costs the traditional conscious existence for the dead, apart from the resurrection at the Parousia.

CHAPTER 5

The Rich Man and Lazarus and the Thief on the Cross

MORE THAN ANY OTHER PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus can be assimilated to the popular teaching that punishment and reward are handed out to the dead before the resurrection. Yet the very idea of the fate of the wicked being sealed and their punishment being meted out before judgment has been pronounced incoherent. Scripture confers immortality upon no one and consigns none of the dead to judgment apart from resurrection (John 5:28, 29; Rev. 20:11- 15). G.E. Ladd notes that “There is one teaching in this passage [The parable of the rich man and Lazarus] which contradicts the total Biblical teaching about the intermediate state, namely that judgment and reward take place immediately after death.

Elsewhere judgment always occurs at the Second Coming” (The Last Things, p. 34, emphasis mine).

Non-Biblical Presuppositions

The story of Lazarus and the rich man can, in fact, be read from two entirely different viewpoints. Everything depends upon what presuppositions are brought to bear upon this intriguing section of Scripture. While borrowing some of the contemporary Pharisaic terminology, Jesus does not actually subscribe to the non-Biblical sources the Pharisees had embraced under the influence of Greek thinking. We approach the parable firmly convinced by the Old Testament that hades is not at present a place of torment for wicked human spirits, and that a conscious human spirit, deprived of its body, is unthinkable for the Biblical writers. Hades in the future may become a place of punishment (Ps. 9:17).

The opening words, “Now there was a certain man...” remind us of the story of the prodigal son and the parable of the unjust steward, which begin with the same phrase, and caution us that we are dealing with a story with a moral rather than a straight discourse on eschatology. “It is inconceivable,” says F.W. Farrar (Smith’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2, p. 1038) “to ground the proof of an important theological doctrine on a passage which confessedly abounds in Jewish metaphor.”

G.M. Gwatkin in *The Eye for Spiritual Things*, p. 41, wrote of our text: “Let me only warn you that parable is parable and not literal fact. It is good for the lesson our Lord means to teach, but we cannot take for granted that He means to teach everything He seems to say, for example that in Paradise we shall sit in Abraham’s lap.” A Regius Professor of Hebrew expressed a similar view: “To suppose it to be our Lord’s object here to give a doctrine of the Intermediate State is entirely to misunderstand the parable” (Dr. C.H. Wright, *The Intermediate State*, p. 278).

How rarely have the warnings been heeded! In their teaching about future punishment the Pharisees had revolutionized the thinking of the Old Testament by absorbing the same Platonic philosophy which lies at the root of so much of our own theology. Several of the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal books show that the sheol/hades of Scripture had become an animated abode of

disembodied spirits, contrary to the Old Testament description of the grave as a place “where there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom” (Eccl. 9:10), and where the dead go down into silence and “know nothing at all” (Eccl. 9:5), while they “sleep in the dust” (Dan. 12:2).

The Pharisees had divided sheol/hades into two compartments to accommodate the righteous “in Abraham’s bosom” and the wicked undergoing “curses, scourges, and torments” (1 Enoch 22:9-13). There are clear points of contact between the language of the parable in Luke and the teaching of the Pharisees. Yet despite the borrowing of phraseology, the parable nowhere specifically states that the scenes of reward and punishment described in verses 22-26 occur before the resurrection. Though the story may be made to fit the Platonic system of immediate survival at death, it is highly significant that Lazarus and the rich man are not seen as disembodied spirits or souls; but the parable (i.e., at least verses 19 to 26) may also be read quite satisfactorily with the Biblical scheme in mind. We do not therefore need to say that Jesus “accommodated” his story to the Pharisaic doctrine of the afterlife. An exact program of events is in any case hardly to be expected in a parable. Its purpose lies elsewhere. To use this story alone as the basis of one’s understanding of what happens at death, when so much clear instruction is given elsewhere in Scripture, is scarcely justifiable.

The Messianic Banquet

If we read with the Biblical eschatology in mind, we shall understand the reference to the poor man’s being carried into the bosom of Abraham as parallel to the angels gathering the faithful into the Kingdom of God and the Messianic banquet at the Parousia (Matt. 24:31; Luke 14:15), where they will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the faithful (Matt. 8:11). This reward is placed by Jesus “at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:14). It would be unwise to suggest on the basis of our story that Luke now places the reward at the moment of death. The burial of the rich man is followed by his “lifting up his eyes” (can this be a veiled reference to opening the eyes in resurrection?) followed by his suffering torment in the flame (Luke 16:24). Here we are reminded that “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God [at the Parousia] and yourselves cast out” (Luke 13:28). Perhaps even verse 23 falls short of stating clearly that the torment was experienced in hades, though it could be read in that sense. It is interesting that some texts, including the Vulgate, join the words “in hades” to “was buried,” and begin a new sentence with “Having lifted up his eyes...” (i.e., “et sepultus est in inferno.

Elevans autem oculos suos...”). On that reading there would be nothing to suggest that hades was a place of torment.

If, however, torment is to be associated with hades, then a reference to the lake of fire, the second death, a place of punishment, may be intended (Rev. 20:14). In that passage the first death and hades are thrown into the lake of fire, which is then known as the second death. The second death, unlike the first, is indeed a place of retribution associated even with torment (Rev. 14:10; 20:10), though nothing is said of eternal torment. It may well be that Jesus alludes to the “new

hades” of the second death, the new world of the dead, which is quite distinct from the hades of the first death, which is throughout Scripture a place of rest and silence for good and bad alike, and indeed the place to which Jesus himself went when he died (Acts 2:31). It is not quite accurate to say that all death is abolished when death and hades are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14) for the lake of fire is itself called the second death (Rev. 21:8) and death therefore survives in a new form, as a place of burning.

Poetic Imagery?

It would, of course, be quite possible to understand the entire conversation between the dead as poetic imagery similar to the passage in Isaiah 14:11 where the dead are represented as speaking to each other. No one need take literally the statement that the “slain” move and speak! In any case our parable contains no concession to the Platonic view of survival as a disembodied spirit, even though the language of the Pharisees is borrowed for effect.

Most significant is the mention of eyes, finger, and tongue, showing that there is no indication here of survival as a disembodied “soul,” though traditional theology almost always makes its appeal to this story as a basis for the doctrine of the post-mortem state. Does anyone, however, believe that the rich man could literally communicate with Abraham in heaven? A thoroughly literal reading of the story proves too much!

The widespread use of this parable to teach that rewards and punishments follow immediately upon death reflects in our time the major shift in the eschatological picture which began to affect the Christian church as early as the second century, under the influence of Greek philosophy. We revert once again to the dictum of Canon Goudge who considered that the infiltration of Roman and Greek ideas into the Christian church represents “a disaster from which we have never recovered, either in doctrine or in practice.” The transformation of the Christian outlook on the future entailed a dangerous interference with the doctrine of the resurrection and the Parousia. The “antedating” of events which are post-resurrection and Parousia in the Scriptural scheme led to the collapse of the eschatological structure of the New Testament, thus striking at the very heart of the Christian message of the Kingdom of God. The very same tendency to transpose future eschatological events into the present reappears in sectarian theology as a 1914 Parousia, and in some evangelical circles, a pre-tribulation rapture.¹² The doctrine of the survival of the soul at death falls into the same category. So does the persistent liberal tendency to understand the Kingdom of God as only a present “reign in the hearts” of the believers, rather than with the New Testament as predominately the eschatological Kingdom to be manifested at the Parousia. In every case the central doctrine of resurrection is under attack (as it was in Paul’s day—1 Cor. 15:12; 2 Tim. 2:18), and with it the doctrine of the coming of the Messiah to establish his Kingdom.

The Thief on the Cross

A single verse in the Gospel according to Luke has been held to provide evidence that Jesus expected an immediate presence in heaven for himself and the thief on the cross, on the day of the

crucifixion. The insurmountable difficulties involved in such an interpretation are seldom considered. Alan Richardson cautions against reading this verse in a way which contradicts the general New Testament view (Introduction to New Testament Theology, p. 346).

E. Earle Ellis warns us likewise that the common interpretation “is not in accord with Jesus’ teachings elsewhere or with the general New Testament view of man and of death” (New Century Bible Commentary on Luke, p. 269). He then rightly refers us to Luke 20:27-40 which shows that life after death for Abraham depends on his future resurrection. According to our translations, Jesus said to the thief: “Verily I say to you, Today you will be with me in paradise.” Can it really be that we are to understand that Christ was offering the thief a place in heaven (into which Christ alone is said to have passed, Heb.

4:14) apart from the resurrection, and in advance of all the faithful including David, who in Acts 2:34 had “not ascended into heaven”? Indeed, was Jesus himself expecting to be with the Father that day, in view of his statement to the Jews that “as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40)? How indeed could he have been in paradise on the day of the crucifixion, when according to the prophecy of his death cited by Peter he was in hades until the resurrection (Acts 2:31)? Even on the Sunday of his resurrection he had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17).¹³ The attempts which have been made to preserve the traditional scheme intact involve some questionable exegesis. It has been suggested that paradise here was not in the presence of the Father but in the world of the dead. But the paradise of Scripture is found not in the heart of the earth, but in the restored garden of Eden, which contains the tree of life: “To him who overcomes, I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise garden of God” (Rev. 2:7; 22:2). No one would propose that the tree of life is growing in the realm of the dead!

The solution to the problem posed by Jesus’ promise to the thief may well lie in the punctuation of Luke 23:43. George R.

Berry, editor of the Interlinear Literal Translation, wrote: “There is no authority anywhere in the Greek text for punctuation.” The Greek adverb here rendered “today” appears in the LXX and the New Testament 221 times. In 170 of these occurrences the adverb follows the verb it modifies, and often accompanies statements of great solemnity: Thus in the Old Testament we have: “I say unto you today”; “I testify to you today.” Examples may be found in Deuteronomy 6:6; 8:11; 10:13; 11:8, 17, 23; 13:8; 19:9; 27:4; 31:2. It is not unnatural, therefore, that we should punctuate Luke 23:43 as follows: “Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.” Paul uses a similar turn of phrase in Acts 20:26: “I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men.” A few reasonably early manuscripts do place the comma in Luke 23:43 as we suggest.¹⁴ In view of the thief’s request, the reply of Jesus makes good sense so punctuated. He had asked that Jesus remember him when he came in (the power of) his Kingdom, that is, at the Parousia, when the Kingdom is to be manifested in glory. The Lord’s assertion more than satisfies the thief’s request; he assures him that he is remembered on that very day, in advance of the coming of the Kingdom. He will indeed be with Jesus in the paradise of the future Kingdom.

John 11:26

It is sometimes contended that Jesus' statement in John 11:26, "He who believes in me shall never die," proves that the dead must come immediately into the presence of God. So translated, the statement is in conflict with the saying which precedes it: "He who believes in me, though he shall have died, shall live."

In John 5:24, Jesus says that the believer has the life of the coming age,¹⁵ but this does not preclude the need for resurrection at the last day: "This is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who believes in the Son should have the life of the coming age, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40).

Resurrection at the last day is associated with the life of the age to come. The resurrection theme recurs as a kind of chorus in verses 39, 44, 54. The resurrection from the grave to the life of the coming age is clearly taught in John 5:29. With these passages in mind we suggest that John 11:26 should be rendered literally (with A.H. McHeile, *New Testament Teaching in the Light of St. Paul's*, p. 268): "Everyone who lives and believes in me shall not die for ever"—eis ton aiona, in the (coming) age.

We have a parallel in 8:35: "The bondman does not remain in the house during the age" (eis ton aiona—AV "does not remain forever").¹⁶ Alive Before the Resurrection?

Three further passages of Scripture are sometimes advanced in support of the view that the dead are alive before the resurrection. The episode related in 1 Samuel 28 concerns a so-called appearance of Samuel after his death. There are good reasons for belief that the medium, with the help of a demon spirit, was able to effect an impersonation of Samuel. It makes no sense at all to suppose that, having refused to communicate with Saul by any legitimate means (1 Sam. 28:6), the Lord would speak to him through Samuel, using practices which he had forbidden as an "abomination." In any case Saul saw nothing. It was the medium alone who saw "gods ascending from the earth" and "an old man...covered with a mantle." The whole story looks like a case of fraud, and the comment in 1 Chronicles 10:13, read in the original, suggests that what Saul consulted was the familiar spirit itself, rather than, as he thought, the ghost of Samuel. And Samuel was not a disembodied soul.

At the transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus.

The event is described as a vision (Matt. 17:9), and like John's vision of unfulfilled events in the book of Revelation, cannot be taken as a statement of the actual survival of Moses and Elijah. It can hardly be that they had been resurrected to immortality in advance of Jesus, the firstfruits, and the writer to the Hebrews thinks of all the Old Testament heroes of faith, including Moses and the prophets, as having died, without receiving the promised reward (Heb. 11:13, 39). The transfiguration is understood by Peter to be a vision of the Parousia (2 Pet. 1:17, 18.)

It is sometimes alleged that the discussion between Jesus and the Sadducees about resurrection shows that Jesus thought of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as alive before the resurrection!

However, this is to miss the point of the Lord's teaching. His aim was to point to the absolute necessity of resurrection. Since the patriarchs were (and are still) dead, there must be a future resurrection, for God is not the God of the dead but of the living!

(Matt. 22:29-33).

CHAPTER 6

Hades and the Apostolic Creeds

IT HAS BEEN OUR PURPOSE to show that the traditional idea of hades as a place of punishment and reward at death for departed human spirits cannot be derived from Scripture. It was in post-New Testament times that the hades of Scripture was transformed by those professing the Christian religion into a place for departed souls separated from their bodies. The Biblical teaching was thus submerged under Greek ideas about the nature of man.

An interesting confirmation of this is found in the addition which was made to the original so-called Apostolic Creed.

According to Bingham's *Antiquities of the Christian Church*, book 10, chapter 3, section 7, "The descent into Hell hath not been so anciently in the creed, or so universally as the rest." The original form of the creed enumerated in precise order the circumstances of the death and resurrection of the Lord: "He was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose from the dead."

There was no mention at this stage of the descent into hades. Yet nearly 400 years after the death of Christ we find the phrase "He descended into hades" in use in the Aquileian Creed, in which, however, the phrase "He was buried" does not appear. "I observe," says Bishop Pearson, "that in the Aquileian Creed, where this article [the descent into hades] was first expressed, there was no mention of Christ's burial; but the words of their confession ran thus: 'Crucified under Pontius Pilate, He descended into hades (inferno)'; from whence there is no question that though the Roman and Oriental Creeds had not these words, yet they had the sense of them in the word 'buried.' It appears, therefore, that the first intention of putting these words in the creed was only to express the burial of our Savior, or the descent of his body into the grave" (Pearson on the Creed, art. 5, emphasis mine, cited by H. Constable in *Hades or the Intermediate State*, p. 323ff).

Thus the Roman Creed had the expression "buried," but omitted "descended into hades," while the Aquileian Creed contained the phrase "descended into hades," but omitted "buried." The implication is that at this time the descent into hades was understood as nothing other than burial in the grave.

Yet a new idea had been gaining ground in the church—the Platonic idea of the soul as the real man unaffected by death.

Once again the serpent menaced the church with his opposition to the divine Word. The lie that “thou shalt not surely die,” the slogan of innate immortality, was surreptitiously introduced into Christian theology in the guise of a sophisticated philosophy about the nature of man. Plato was supplanting the Bible. In Oscar Cullmann’s celebrated phrase: “1 Corinthians 15 was sacrificed for the Phaedo.” While men slept, the enemy crept on.

Plato’s Victory

The doctrine of the intermediate state, accommodating the notion of immortal man, was mixed with the Biblical doctrine of resurrection. The soul went to hades, so said the Scripture (Acts 2:31); yet the soul could not die; so hades could not be the grave; the body alone must therefore go to the grave, while the surviving soul goes to hades (and later, in the case of the righteous, to heaven), fully conscious. The credal statement must be adjusted to reflect the new faith. So the Roman statement was added to the Aquileian formula about the descent into hades, and Plato had won the day. A brief sentence from Theophylact sums up the new theology: “You will find,” he says, “that there is some difference between Hades and Death; namely, that Hades contains the souls, but death the bodies. For the souls are immortal” (Theophylact, quoted in Usher’s Answers, ch. 8).

The effects of the incorporation of Plato into Christ, without baptism, are seen everywhere in 20th-century theology. Our purpose must be to restore the Biblical creed, turning our minds from the lie of Platonic survival to the truth of the resurrection of the dead. In so doing we shall cease to suppress the eschatological scheme with which our New Testament documents are saturated.

While the hades/sheol of Scripture designates the world of the dead “where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest” (Job 3:17) and the dead “sleep in the dust of the earth”¹⁷ (Dan. 12:2), the dread word gehenna or gehenna of fire describes the place of future punishment for the wicked either at the Parousia (for those alive at that time) or following the millennial period, in a resurrection to judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). As long as belief in man’s natural immortality persists, students of Scripture will presumably be committed to the appalling doctrine of unending torment in consciousness for those found unworthy of the Kingdom. It seems certain that the notion of endless torment for all those who do not partake in the first resurrection is dependent on the unbiblical doctrine of the indestructibility of the soul.¹⁸ Dr. William Temple (1882-1944), Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote: “One thing we can say with confidence: everlasting torment is to be ruled out. If men had not imported the Greek and unbiblical notion of the natural indestructibility of the individual soul, and then read the New Testament with that in their minds, they would have drawn from it a belief, not in everlasting torment, but in annihilation” (Christian Faith and Life, London: SCM Press, p. 81).

CHAPTER 7

The Witness of Scholars Ancient and Modern

The Forgotten Orthodoxy of Irenaeus and Justin Martyr

It is a little-known fact that the earliest Greek theologians of the second century protested against the unscriptural views of the intermediate state which have become so entrenched in our theological systems. The idea that the soul can survive death in a disembodied form, fully conscious in the presence of God, and representing the real man separated from his body, was rejected by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus as a dangerous heresy. The following excerpts speak for themselves. Both writers championed the Biblical doctrine of resurrection against attack from Greek philosophy.

Irenaeus: Against Heresies

“Some who are reckoned among the orthodox go beyond the prearranged plan for the exaltation of the just, and are ignorant of the methods by which they are disciplined beforehand for incorruption; they thus entertain heretical opinions. For the heretics...affirm that immediately upon their death they shall pass above the heavens. Those persons, therefore, who reject a resurrection affecting the whole man, and do their best to remove it from the Christian scheme, know nothing as to the plan of resurrection. For they do not choose to understand that, if these things are as they say, the Lord Himself, in Whom they profess to believe, did not rise again on the third day; but immediately upon His expiring departed on high, leaving His body in the earth. But the facts are that for three days, He dwelt in the place where the dead were, as Jonah remained three days and three nights in the whale’s belly (Matt. 12:40)...David says, when prophesying of Him: ‘Thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell.’ And on rising the third day, He said to Mary, ‘Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father’ (John 20:17)...How then must not these men be put to confusion, who allege...that their inner man, leaving the body here, ascends into the supercelestial place? For as the Lord ‘went away in the midst of the shadow of death’ (Ps. 23:4), where the souls of the dead were, and afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up into heaven, it is obvious that the souls of His disciples also...shall go away into the invisible place...and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event; then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, bodily, just as the Lord rose, they shall come thus into the presence of God. As our Master did not at once take flight to heaven, but awaited the time of His resurrection...so we ought also to await the time of our resurrection.

“Inasmuch, therefore, as the opinions of certain orthodox persons are derived from heretical discourses, they are both ignorant of God’s dispensations, of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the earthly kingdom which is the beginning of incorruption; by means of this kingdom those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of the divine nature” (Book 5, chs. 31, 32, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Eerdmans, Vol. 1, pp. 560, 561).

Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho

“For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit the truth of the resurrection and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; who say that

there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls when they die are taken to heaven: do not imagine that they are Christians; just as one, if he would rightly consider it, would not admit that the Sadducees, or similar sects of the Genistae, Meristae, Galileans, Hellenists, Pharisees, Baptists, are Jews but are only called Jews, worshiping God with the lips, as God declared, but their heart was far from Him. But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare” (Dialogue with Trypho, ch. 80, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, p. 239).

The Witness of Scholars

The words of these early spokesmen for the faith are echoed in our own time by the remarks of Alan Richardson, D.D.: The Bible writers, holding fast to the conviction that the created order owes its existence to the wisdom and love of God and is therefore essentially good, could not conceive of life after death as a disembodied existence (“we shall not be found naked”—2 Cor. 5:3), but as a renewal under new conditions of the intimate unity of body and soul which was human life as they knew it. Hence death was thought of as the death of the whole man, and such phrases as “freedom from death,” imperishability or immortality could only properly be used to describe what is meant by the phrase eternal or living God “who only has immortality” (1 Tim 6:16). Man does not possess within himself the quality of deathlessness, but must, if he is to overcome the destructive power of death, receive it as the gift of God “who raised Christ from the dead,” and put death aside like a covering garment (1 Cor. 15:53, 54). It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that this possibility for man (2 Tim.

1:10) has been brought to life and the hope confirmed that the corruption (Rom. 11:7) which is a universal feature of human life shall be effectively overcome (A Theological Word Book of the Bible, pp. 111, 112, emphasis mine).

Floyd Filson warns us of the danger of Greek philosophy. He asserts that it has infiltrated our theology, which would therefore be condemned by the New Testament.

The primary kinship of the New Testament is not with the Gentile environment, but rather with the Jewish heritage and environment... We are often led by our traditional creeds and theology to think in terms dictated by Gentile and especially Greek concepts. We know that not later than the second century there began the systematic effort of the Apologists to show that the Christian faith perfected the best in Greek philosophy... A careful study of the New Testament must block any trend to regard the New Testament as a group of documents expressive of the Gentile mind.

This book’s kinship is primarily and overwhelmingly with Judaism and the Old Testament...

The New Testament speaks always of disapproval and usually with blunt denunciation of Gentile cults and philosophies. It agrees essentially with the Jewish indictment of the pagan world (The New Testament Against its Environment, pp. 26, 27).

The fundamental confusion about life after death which has so permeated our thinking is well described by Dr. Paul Althaus in his book, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 413, 414): The hope of the early church centered on the resurrection of the Last Day. It is this which first calls the dead into eternal life (1 Cor. 15; Phil. 3:21). This resurrection happens to the man and not only to the body. Paul speaks of the resurrection not “of the body” but “of the dead.” This understanding of the resurrection implicitly understands death as also affecting the whole man... Thus the original Biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from Hellenistic Gnostic dualism. The New Testament idea of the resurrection which affects the whole man has had to give way to the immortality of the soul.

The Last Day also loses its significance, for souls have received all that is decisively important long before this. Eschatological tension is no longer strongly directed to the day of Jesus’ Coming. The difference between this and the hope of the New Testament is very great” (emphasis mine).

A variety of biblical experts confirm our findings: The celebrated *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*: “No biblical text authorizes the statement that the soul is separated from the body at the moment of death” (Vol. 1, p. 802).

Companion Bible by E.W. Bullinger, on 2 Corinthians 5:8: “It is little less than a crime for anyone to pick out certain words and frame them into a sentence, not only disregarding the scope and context, but ignoring the other words in the verse, and quote the words ‘absent from the body, present with the Lord’ with the view of dispensing with the hope of the Resurrection (which is the subject of the whole passage) as though it were unnecessary; and as though ‘present with the Lord’ is obtainable without it.”

Families at the Crossroads, by Rodney Clapp (pp. 95, 97): “Following Greek and medieval Christian thought, we often sharply separate the soul and body, and emphasize that the individual soul survives death. What’s more we tend to believe the disembodied soul has escaped to heaven, to a more pleasant and fully alive existence. We mistakenly envision the Christian hope as an individual affair, a matter of separate souls taking flight to heaven.

But none of this was the case for the ancient Israelites.”

Martin Luther: “I think that there is not a place in Scripture of more force for the dead who have fallen asleep, than Ecc. 9:5 (‘the dead know nothing at all’), understanding nothing of our state and condition—against the invocation of saints and the fiction of Purgatory.”

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, *Sermon on the Parable of Lazarus*: “It is, indeed, very generally supposed that the souls of good men, as soon as they are discharged from the body, go directly to heaven; but this opinion has not the least foundation in the oracles of God. On the contrary our Lord says to Mary, after the resurrection, ‘Touch me not; for I have not yet ascended to my Father.’” Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 378: (Dr. Guthrie is Professor of Systematic Theology, Columbia Theological Seminary.

His book from which the following is quoted is known as a “classic text.”) “We have to talk about a point of view that from the perspective of Christian faith is falsely optimistic because it does not take death seriously enough...Because the position we are about to criticize and reject is just what many believe is the foundation of the Christian hope for the future...we reject it not to destroy hope for eternal life, but to defend an authentically biblical Christian hope...We refer to belief in the immortality of the soul. This doctrine was not taught by the biblical writers themselves, but was common in the [pagan] Greek and oriental religions of the ancient world in which the Christian church was born. Some of the earliest Christian theologians were influenced by it, read the Bible in the light of it, and introduced it into the thinking of the church. It has been with us ever since. Calvin accepted it and so did the classical confession of the Reformed Churches, the Westminster Confession. According to this doctrine, my body will die but I myself will not really die...What happens to me at death, then, is that my immortal soul escapes from my mortal body. My body dies but I myself live on and return to the spiritual realm from which I came and to which I really belong. If we follow the Protestant Reformation in seeking to ground our faith on ‘Scripture alone,’ we must reject this traditional hope for the future based on the immortality of the soul...[Death] does not mean that the immortal divine part of us has departed to live on somewhere else. It means that life has left us, that our lives have come to an end, that we are ‘dead and gone.’ According to Scripture...my soul is just as human, creaturely, finite—and mortal—as my body. It is simply the life of my body...We have no hope at all if our hope is in our own in-built immortality.”

Robert Capon, *Parables of Judgment*, Eerdmans, 1989, p. 71: “One last theological point while we are on the subject of resurrection and judgment. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to our seeing the judgment of Jesus as the grand sacrament of vindication is our unfortunate preoccupation with the notion of the immortality of the soul. The doctrine is a piece of non-Hebraic philosophical baggage with which we have been stuck ever since the church got out into the wide world of Greek thought. Along with the concomitant idea of [immediate] ‘life after death,’ it has given us almost nothing but trouble: both concepts militate against a serious acceptance of the resurrection of the dead that is the sole basis of judgment.”

Prof. Earle Ellis, *Christ and the Future in NT History* (Brill, 2000): “The Platonic view that the essential person (soul/spirit) survives physical death has serious implications for Luke's Christology and for his theology of salvation in history...For eschatology it represents a Platonizing of the Christian hope, a redemption from time and matter. Luke, on the contrary, places individual salvation (and loss) at the resurrection in time and matter at the last day. He underscores that Jesus was resurrected in ‘the flesh’ and makes him ‘the first to rise from the dead,’ the model on which all ‘entering into glory’ is to be understood.

“An anthropological dualism did enter the thought of the Patristic church, chiefly, I suppose, with the grandiose synthesis of Christianity and Greek philosophy made by Clement and Origen. It brought into eclipse the early Christian hope of the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead [and the Kingdom of God on earth].

But it did not characterize the Christianity of the New Testament, and can be found in Luke only if one reads the texts, as those Christian fathers did, with lenses ground in Athens” (p. 127).

“...while death is not an individual fulfillment of salvation, during death one remains under Christ’s Lordship and in his care...(but) while the Christian dead remain in time, they do not count time. The hiatus in their individual being between their death and their resurrection at the last day of this age is, in their consciousness, a tick of the clock. For them the great and glorious day of Christ’s Parousia is only a moment into the future. The ‘intermediate state’ is something that the living experience with respect to the dead, not something the dead experience with respect to the living or to Christ.

“Those with lenses ground in Athens, numerous in Christian tradition, see a quite different picture. They posit that a part of the person, the soul, is not subject to a cessation of being (and thus is not an element of the natural world) but that at the death of the body it is ‘separated’ to bodiless bliss or, in a variation on the theme, that there is a resurrection at death in which the physical body is exchanged for a spirit body already being formed within [this would destroy the program given in 1 Cor. 15 and many times elsewhere].

“Although they have many traditional roots and attachments, such theologies have, I think, seriously misunderstood Paul’s salvation-in-history eschatology. It is because Paul regards the body as the person and the person as the physical body that he insists on the resurrection of the body, placing it at the Parousia of Christ in which personal redemption is coupled to and is part of the redemption-by-transfiguration of the whole physical cosmos. The transformed physical body of the believer will be called forth from the earth by God’s almighty creative word [at the Parousia], no less than were the transformed physical body of Christ and the originally lifeless body of the Genesis creation” (pp 177, 178).

An Appeal

The difference between received tradition and the teaching of Scripture, we contend, involves the difference between truth and falsehood, between the teaching of the apostles and the poison of Gnosticism.¹⁹ The effects of so widespread and fundamental a mistake must be detrimental to the faith. The authorities we have cited, as well as countless others whose protest space does not permit us to include, show that what is proposed by our study is no private opinion, but one backed by responsible expositors of Scripture. It is surely time for the doctrinal gulf which separates contemporary religion from the New Testament to be taken seriously.

It must be apparent that traditional theological ideas, however long they may have enjoyed popular approval, are not necessarily a safe guide to the teachings of the New Testament.

In some quarters a whole system of theology (including the belief that Mary is fully active as a mediatrix in heaven) has been erected on the false premise that the dead are alive in heaven.

Yet Scripture says that David never ascended to heaven (Acts 2:34), that no one has ascended to heaven except Jesus (John 3:13), and that the heroes of the Old Testament “died in faith without receiving the promises” (Heb. 11:13). It is highly significant that the first recorded lie in Scripture was precisely in support of the innate immortality of man. It was the Serpent, Satan, who declared “Thou shalt not surely die,” in flat contradiction of the divine statement that “Thou [the whole person] shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). It is utterly impossible to reconcile prayer to Mary and the saints with apostolic teaching, when both she and they are, in New Testament terms, at present unconscious, “asleep” in death, awaiting the first resurrection (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28, 29).

If it is objected that the promise of an immediate presence in heaven is more comforting than the assurance of resurrection at the second coming of Jesus, we reply that it is futile to administer comfort from the pulpit which has no sound basis in God’s Word. Indeed there are solemn warnings in the Bible that judgment will fall on all who do not speak according to the oracles of God (Jer. 23:16-18, 21, 22). It is only by proclaiming the truth that the preacher can hope to save himself or his audience (1 Tim. 4:16). And no doubt the latter will ultimately thank their minister for having told them what they need to hear from the Bible as distinct from what they may want to hear.

It must be the duty of every inquirer after the truth of the Christian faith to take to heart the uncomfortable warning of Jesus that to worship within the framework of human tradition as opposed to revealed truth is to worship in vain (Matt. 15:9), for those who approach God must do so “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). We must give thought to the possibility that our tradition has obscured the central Christian doctrine of resurrection and indeed the Biblical eschatology as a whole, including the Kingdom of God to be inaugurated following the resurrection.

We therefore appeal for a reexamination of this critically important issue, in the interests of the restoration of Biblical faith.

In view of the recognized facts of church history, our task is clear: to purge our traditional teachings of the alien ideas which were acquired soon after New Testament times and which do not belong to the pure faith of the Bible: Across the pages of the Old and New Testaments the clear waters of revealed truth flow like a majestic river. It is God, who only hath immortality, offering to men and communicating to the believer His divine, imperishable life.

But paralleling this stream flows the muddy river of pagan philosophy, which is that of human soul, of divine essence, eternal, pre-existing the body and surviving it.

After the death of the apostles the two streams merged to make unity of the troubled waters. Little by little the speculation of human philosophy mixed with divine teaching.

Now the task of evangelical theology is to disengage the two incompatible elements, to dissociate them, to eliminate the pagan element which has installed itself as a usurper in the center of traditional theology; to restore in value the Biblical element, which only is true, which alone conforms to the nature of God and of man, His creature.²⁰ Endnotes 1 It is also true that man “has

life” or “soul.” But “soul” here does not mean an “immortal soul.”

2 Ascent to heaven on this saying of Jesus may alternatively refer to participation in the divine secrets of wisdom, cp. Deut. 30:12.

3 Alternatively, Stephen is quoting Psalm 31:5 where David, who was not about to die, says, “into Your hand I commit my spirit.”

Stephen will be made alive at the resurrection with the faithful (1 Cor. 15:22, 23).

4 Hebrews 12:23 states that the entire church is enrolled in heaven and consists of those whose spirits are perfected. It does not say that the dead are alive in heaven before the resurrection as disembodied spirits!

5 Further confusion was added by rendering a third word Tartaros by “hell.” Tartaros, or rather a verbal form derived from it, occurs only in 2 Pet. 2:4 and describes a place of imprisonment for fallen angels, not human beings.

6 The kings in sheol are poetically represented as addressing the ruined king of Babylon who is promised maggots as a bed and worms as a covering (Isa. 14:10, 11).

7 The “everlasting life” of Daniel 12:2 is literally “life in the coming age” of the Messianic Kingdom on earth (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10). The equivalent in the New Testament—“eternal life,” “everlasting life”—is a technical term which should also be rendered “life in the coming age” (cp. note 15).

8 See the excellent discussion in *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, by E.G. Selwyn, pp. 198, 199.

9 *In the End God*, p. 91.

10 Mainstream “orthodoxy” can learn much from the work done by so-called “sects,” whose concern for the truths of Scripture often exposes the ignorance and apathy of some routine churchgoers.

11 In 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17, Paul describes how we come to be “with the Lord”—through resurrection at the second coming.

12 Cf. 2 Tim. 2:18 for a similar attempt to transpose the eschatological future into the present.

13 The suggestion that paradise was in hades finds no support in Scripture. The locating of paradise in hades would mean that Jesus and the thief were there together, but both dead, for three days only! At his resurrection, Jesus would have left the thief in paradise, for Christ alone has been resurrected (1 Cor. 15:23).

14 *Das Neue Testament*, translated by Wilhelm Michaelis, Kröner Verlag, 1934, reads, “Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I assure you even today: you will one day be with me in Paradise.’ ‘Today’

probably belongs in the first part of the sentence.”

15 The proper rendering of the AV “eternal life” is the “life of the coming age.” See Barratt, *Gospel According to John*, p. 26, 179; Vincent Taylor, *Commentary on Mark*, p. 426; Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, pp. 455ff.

16 Alternatively those who are said never to die may be the ones who survive until the Parousia. These are clearly described by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:15.

17 We note with interest the remark of D.E.H. Whiteley that this can only mean unconscious sleep (*The Theology of St. Paul*, p. 266). But Daniel 12:2 is surely the locus classicus for the Biblical doctrine of death and resurrection.

18 An extended torment “into the ages of the ages” is promised to Satan, the beast, and the false prophet (Rev. 20:10). Jesus speaks of the soul being destroyed in gehenna (Matt. 10:28).

19 It should be noted that a specific warning against the dangers of gnosis falsely so-called was given by Paul in his first letter to Timothy: “Pay attention to yourself and to your teaching...In so doing you will save yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16). “Guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge [gnosis]” (1 Tim. 6:20).

20 Alfred Vaucher, *Le Problème de L’immortalité*, 1957, p. 6.

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“My impression is that the consensus of opinion in the church is still more controlled by an extra-Christian idea of immortality of the soul, than by any conception formed after listening faithfully to the New Testament witness”

(Neill Q. Hamilton, “The Last Things in the Last Decade,”

Interpretation, April, 1960). “Christian men are now inquiring whether accepted views of human nature and future punishment are derived from philosophy and tradition, or from Scripture. They are beginning to suspect that a vast amount of current theology has human philosophy for its source. Figures in the field of religious thought, which they used to think figures of Christ, His prophets, and His apostles, they are beginning to suspect are figures of the evil spirit, figures of Plato, and of various fathers who derived their theology in a great measure from him”

(Canon H. Constable, Hades, or the Intermediate State of Man, 1893, p. 278). “Death for a Christian does not mean a shifting from one mode of being to another but the very destruction of life, the drifting of being into nonbeing. All the thinkers of Christianity have been trying to evade this notion of death as the complete destruction of life. Where they succeed, the notion of resurrection means next to nothing”

(Seiichi Hatano, Time and Eternity, 1949, p. 214).

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