

A New Look at Hell and the Soul

Is there LIFE After DEATH?

What is “Hell”? What is the “Soul”? What is “Sheol”? Is it just an ancient Hebrew name for the “grave”? Does the “soul” have any consciousness after death? Is the human soul immortal? What is “Hell fire”? Does it burn forever to punish wicked souls? Why so much mystery and confusion about these things?

William F. Dankenbring

(Proof Read For Typological Errors & Updated January 2019)

The Worldwide Church of God under Herbert Armstrong, and all of the new churches that have sprung up after the demise of that church, teach that the human soul is a physical entity which perishes at death. They also teach that the term “hell” in the Bible, when it derives from the Hebrew word *sheol* or the Greek word *hades*, always and without exception refers to the grave, i.e. the place where dead bodies of men and women are buried.

Adventists and other Church of God groups, all agree that this is the truth of the matter. But is it really all so simple as that?

What Is “Hell”?

If “Hell” is merely the grave, then why do we read in Isaiah’s prophecy of the king of Babylon, “Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol, to the *lowest depths of the Pit*”? (Isaiah 14:15). Does “Hell” or the “grave” have various “depths,” some “lower” than others? When burying someone, we often refer to them as being “six feet under.” Most burials are about six feet underground. Then why does the Word of God speak of “lowest depths of the Pit,” when referring to the abode of the dead king of Babylon?

In this same passage, we also read that at his death, “Hell [Sheol] from beneath is excited about you, to meet you at your coming; it *stirs up the dead for you, all the chief ones of the earth*; it has raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. They all shall *speak* and say to you: ‘Have you also become as *weak* as we? Have you become like us?’” (Isa.14:9-10).

Fascinating! From this passage, it would appear that “hell” or “Sheol” has different “levels,” and that there is a certain “consciousness” of the dead who have perished long ago! They are able, as it were, to “speak” and “communicate” somewhat with those others who are also “dead.”

The Hebrew word “Sheol” is defined in *Strong’s Concordance* as: “the world of the dead (as if a subterranean retreat), including its accessories and inmates: grave, hell, pit” (#7585). Although sometimes translated “grave,” the Hebrew language also has another word translated “grave,” meaning a “burial place.” It is the word *qebuwrah* (#6900), translated “sepulcher, burial place, grave.”

How does this correlate with other Scriptures regarding the state of the dead? What about when the righteous die?

The Righteous Dead

We read in the book of Revelation that there will be a coming time of great tribulation on the earth, just before the return of the Messiah. At that time, a mysterious event will occur. It occurs during the opening of the fifth “seal” of the prophecy of Revelation, following the riding of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

We read the following account: “When He opened the fifth seal, I saw *under the altar the SOULS of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’* Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should *REST a little longer*, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed” (Rev.6:9-11).

Notice! Here the souls of the righteous dead are pictured as “crying out” to God in anguish, and they are told to “rest a little longer.” Certainly, it does not seem from this passage that the righteous dead are completely dead and unconscious, in the graves! What goes on here? What is this speaking about? How could this be?

Just what is the state of the dead, anyway? Does this passage prove that we all have an “immortal soul” that survives the death of the body?

Those who believe that the dead are simply “gone” – out of existence – when they die, and have no consciousness whatsoever until the resurrection, have great difficulty explaining this verse! Like the verses in Isaiah 14, it seems to be quite clear that although the bodies of the dead are long perished and turned to dust, there is still something remaining of the deceased which continues in existence, and which has *limited consciousness, ability to discern events, and to communicate!*

Those who believe there is no existence of any kind after death until the resurrection are forced to conclude that these strange passages in Scripture are mere allegories and are not literal fact. Yet, there is no evidence in the context that these passages are allegorical, and not true reality! What is the solution to this mystery?

When we die, are we “dead,” totally unconscious, just like any animal? Or is there a difference between human dead and animals?

The State of the Dead

Solomon wrote on this issue. He declared, “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust” (Eccl.3:19-20). Sounds like when we die, we are just like any animal. But whoever heard of a dead animal speaking to or greeting another dead animal when it dies and is buried? What is the difference here?

Solomon goes on, “Who knows the *spirit* of the sons of men, *which goes upward*, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?” (verse 21).

Here we read that human beings have a “spirit.” It goes upward to God when they die. But the spirit of animals goes downward. However, the Septuagint has this a little different, and says, “Who has seen the spirit of the sons of man, whether it goes upward? and the spirit of the beast, whether it goes downward to the earth?”

Adding more to the mystery, Solomon wrote, “Whatsoever thine hand shall find to do, do with all thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in Hades, whither thou goest” (Eccl.9:10, LXX). The New King James Version has this: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”

The dead body of both animals and men are consumed in the grave by worms and bugs, and eaten, and eventually turn to dust. Just as God said. But what of the “spirit” of a man? Solomon wrote, “No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death” (Eccl.8:8).

Solomon also wrote, “As you do not know what is the way of the wind [“spirit”), or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who made everything” (Ecc.11:5). He concluded that at death, “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and *the spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Eccl.12:7).

The body of the dead, then, is put in a grave – a hole in the ground – and covered up with dirt. Bodies are usually put in a casket, first, of course, but not always, as in wars when many dead have to be buried on or near a battlefield. But, Solomon says, the “spirit” of each man, when he dies, returns to God who gave it to him. In the grave, as Solomon wrote, there is no knowledge, or wisdom, device, or life – just a dead corpse, rotting and returning to dust.

The “Spirit” in Man

But what about the “spirit”? What is the “spirit” of man? Job wrote, “But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding’ (Job 32:8). The word for “spirit” in Hebrew is *ruach* and is translated variously as “wind, by resemblance, breath, i.e. a sensible (or even violent) exhalation; fig. life, anger, unsubstantiality; by extension a region of the sky; by resemblance *spirit*, but only of a rational being (incl. its expression and functions)” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*).

In the New Testament, the word for “spirit” is *pneuma* (#4151), meaning “a current of air, i.e. breath (blast) or a breeze; by analogy or figuratively, a spirit i.e. (human) the rational soul, (by implication) vital principle, mentally, disposition, etc., or (superhuman) an angel, demon, or (divine) God, Christ’s spirit, the Holy Spirit.”

In Genesis 2:7 we read that at the creation of man, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the *breath of life*; and man became a living being.”

A New Look at the “Soul”

Another word which figures into this question of man, is the word “soul.” It has often been misunderstood because it has many different meanings. In the verse we just quoted, Genesis 2:7, the words “living being” are translated in the King James Version, and the Septuagint, as “soul.” The Hebrew word is *nephesh*. Strong’s Concordance says of this word, #5315: “a breathing creature, i.e. *animal* of (abstr.) *vitality*; used very widely in a literal, accommodated or figurative sense (bodily or mentally): any, appetite, beast, body, breath, creature . . .”

Souls, or “nepheshes,” if you please, can die. Man was made a “living soul,” and God said to him, if he ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, “you shall surely die” (Gen.2:17).

Ezekiel the prophet tells us further, “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall *die*” Ezek.18:4). Also, “the soul who sins shall die” (verse 20). Speaking of the Day of Atonement, God says, “Any any person [*nephesh* or “soul”] who does any work on that same day, that person [“soul”] I will *destroy* from among his people” (Lev.23:30).

In Leviticus 21:11, God says, “Nor shall he [the high priest] go near any dead *body* [*nephesh*, “soul”]” – showing that the Hebrew word “soul” can refer to dead bodies, or corpses. Numbers 6:6 likewise says of a man under a Nazarite vow, “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead *body*.”

However, please notice that this word has a variety of meanings. It doesn’t just refer to the body as such, but also to “vitality,” that is, “life,” and “breath.”

The Words for “Hell”

The Greek word for “grave,” in the New Testament, is *mnemeion*. *Strong’s Concordance* says of this word: “a remembrance, cenotaph (place of interment), grave, sepulcher, tomb.”

Another word, the equivalent word for the Hebrew word *Sheol* in the New Testament is *Hades*. It means: “properly, *unseen*, the place (state) of departed souls – grave, hell.”

Yeshua the Messiah gave His disciples a vital lesson, saying to them, “And do not fear those who kill the body [*soma*] but cannot kill the soul [*psuche*]. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna*]” (Matt.10:28).

Here we have several key words listed. The word “body,” *soma* in Greek, means “the body, bodily, slave.” The “soul,” *psuche*, means, “breath, i.e. by implication, spirit, abstract or concrete (the *animal* sentient principle only)” (see #5590). The word “hell,” here, is *gehenna*, meaning the “lake of fire” which will consume the wicked at the end of the age or on the day of final judgment. *Strong’s Concordance* says of this word: “Valley of the son of Hinnom, *ge-henna*, a valley of Jerusalem, used (fig.) as the name of the place or state of everlasting punishment.”

Yeshua said, “But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell [Greek, *Gehenna*] fire” (Matt.5:22). The final judgment is a lake of “fire” which will consume and burn up the wicked, and their death and destruction will be everlasting – an eternal punishment. *Gehenna* fire will be a huge “lake of fire and brimstone” (Rev.20:10), and it is called the “second death” – the final death from which there is no resurrection to life.

The apostle John declares, speaking of this future time of judgment, “The sea gave up the dead which were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death” (Rev.20:13-14).

Putting these Scriptures together, then, what do we see?

The Old Testament *sheol* is equivalent to the New Testament *hades*. It is the abode of the dead, and includes the grave, but is not necessarily restricted to the word “grave.”

The Old Testament *nephesh* is equivalent to the New Testament *psuche*. Both mean “body,” but also refer to the “vitality” or sentient principle of life.

The New Testament word *gehenna* means the fiery hell or final fate of the wicked.

In addition to these words, there is another term used in the Scriptures that refers to man. It is the “spirit” of man. This word in Hebrew is *ruach*, and means “wind, by resemblance, breath, i.e.. a sensible (or even violent) exhalation; fig. life, anger, unsubstantiality; by extension, a region of the sky; by resemblance *spirit* but only of a rational being” *Strong’s Concordance*, #7307). The New Testament equivalent of this word is *pneuma*, meaning “a current of air, i.e. breath (blast) or a breeze; by anal.. or fig. a *spirit*, i.e. (human) the rational soul, (by impl.) vital principle (#4151).

The Old Testament *ruach* and the New Testament *pneuma* refer to the “spirit” in man, or angels, God’s Spirit, or God, depending on the context of the passage in which “spirit” is mentioned. They can also refer to the “wind,” again, depending on the context.

With these simple definitions, let’s see if we can come to understand just what happens to a man or woman at the point of death!

What Happens When We Die?

Sheol and hades refers to the place of the dead, which includes the grave where the dead body is buried. This is well known and admitted by everybody. However, is there more to it than that? What happens to the “spirit” in man? Many seem to think that when a man dies, his spirit dies or perishes, also.

However, the Messiah said, “It is the Spirit who gives LIFE; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are *spirit*, and they are life” (John 6:63). Spirit cannot “die” – spirit gives LIFE!

The apostle Paul wrote, “For we know that the law [of God] is *spiritual*” Rom.7:14). Yet, we also know that the law of God is ETERNAL. David wrote, “All His precepts are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness” (Psalm 111:7-8).

Confirming that spirit is eternal, ever-lasting, Paul also wrote: “For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are *eternal*” (II Cor.4:18).

Spirit is that which cannot be seen by human eyes. Yeshua said to Nicodemus that a man cannot see the kingdom of God unless He is “born again” (John 3:3). He added, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. . . The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6-8).

Those things which are “spirit,” therefore, are “eternal.”

At death, a man’s spirit returns to God who safe-keeps it until He decides what to do with it, in the future. This period of time is described in the Bible as “sleep.” We read in I Corinthians, “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall *not all sleep*, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (I Cor.15:51-52).

Death is here described as “sleep.” Also, Paul said, “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who *sleep* in Christ” (I Thess.4:14). And, “For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we *wake or sleep*, we should live together with Him” (I Thess.5:9-10).

In other words, even though the body perishes in the grave, the spirit or soul of man – his essence or vitality which is composed of spirit – sleeps on, till the resurrection. It is, of course, alive, for spirit does not die or perish. It is in a state of unconsciousness, for the most part – but that “sleep” can be interrupted by changing circumstances or events, as are portrayed when the king of Babylon joins the rest of the dead, or when the souls of the righteous in heaven are disturbed, witnessing the great tribulation on the earth.

An Unborn Fetus Leaps for Joy!

The fact that the spirit or soul of man does have certain consciousness, or awareness, is also shown by an event revealed in the Gospels. In the book of Luke we read that when Mary was pregnant with the Christ child, she arose to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant with the child who would become John the Baptist, and who was six months further along.

We read, “And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that *the babe leaped in her womb*; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the *babe leaped in my womb for joy*’ (Luke 1:41-44).

The babe itself was still in Elizabeth's womb, unborn, protected in her uterus. Yet, being in this state, it still had sensory perception of its surroundings, and an awareness of the presence of Mary and the Messiah child in her womb! How could this be possible? How could an unborn fetus discern the presence of another unborn fetus, and leap for joy? It was the spirit in the unborn baby that recognized the Presence of the unborn Messiah!

Clearly, there is more to our human spirit than many of us have ever imagined! And there is much more to our entire being – body, mind, soul, and spirit – than most of us have ever understood!

Functions of the Spirit in Man

Spirit not only has sensory awareness while in a babe in the womb, but it also survives death and returns to God who gave it. This spirit, we have been told by some in the past, indeed survives, but they compared it to a tape recording which exists, and contains a person's attributes and character, but has no consciousness – it is just a "tape" of the person's prior life and character.

As we have seen, however, although that scenario points in the right direction, it is simply not completely true. The spirit is far more than just a "tape recording." It actually has awareness of surroundings, and possesses life because spirit itself is from God and cannot "die" It is in a state of suspended animation, having no body. That spirit essence or vitality can think, even speak, is aware of its surroundings, inasmuch as God permits. However, it cannot normally act or do anything. Its natural state is that of "sleep," which we will discuss later.

Notice what the Bible teaches about "spirit." The apostle Paul wrote in Romans, speaking of the Spirit of God, "Likewise the Spirit also helps us in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the *Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered*. Now He who searches the heart knows what the *mind of the Spirit* is, because He makes *intercession for the saints* according to the will of God" (Rom.8:26-27).

Notice! Spirit is able to communicate – it makes intercession. It has feelings, compassion – makes groanings which cannot be uttered. The Greek word for "groanings" here is *stenagmos*, meaning "a sigh, groaning," from *stenazo*, which means "to make (or be) in straits, i.e. to sigh, murmur, pray inaudibly." It is also able to *think!* Paul says God searches the heart and knows the "*MIND* of the spirit." The word *mind* is from the Greek *phroneo*, "to exercise the mind, i.e. entertain or have a sentiment or opinion; by implication to be (mentally) disposed (more or less earnestly in a certain direction); intensively to interest oneself in (with concern or obedience): -- set the affection on."

Notice, also – "The Spirit *bears witness with our spirit*, that we are the children of God" (Rom.8:16). Thus spirit can bear witness or testify. It can therefore communicate. Notice also -- Paul writes to Timothy a warning which the Spirit communicated to him, saying, "Now the Spirit expressly *says* that in the latter times some will depart from the faith" (I Tim.4:1). God uses His Spirit to communicate to our spirit! Solomon tells us, "The spirit of a man is the lamp ["candle," KJV] of the Lord, searching all the inner depths of his heart" (Prov.20:27).

There is far more to “spirit” than most of us have ever understood! When we die, then, our human spirit, united with God’s Holy Spirit, which we receive when we repent of our sins and become Christ’s, returns to God as a united entity, awaiting the resurrection when it will be restored to a new, glorious body (Eccl.12:7). At that time Christ our Saviour will “transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself” (Phil.3:21), and reunite our spirit with a new spiritual body.

What happens, then, to the spirit of man, at death?

The “Abode of the Dead”

The term “Hades,” and “Sheol,” therefore, are rightly interpreted as “the abode of the dead,” without necessarily distinguishing where that abode is in every case. Obviously, the body goes back to the earth and decomposes and returns to dust. However, the spirit does not necessarily remain hovering about the grave. Rather, it “returns to God who gave it” (Eccl.12:7).

The “abode of the dead,” therefore, also includes the place where the spirit of the person goes, after death, as the spirit continues in existence even after the body moulders and turns to corruption in the grave, returning to “dust.” The “spirit” returns to God who gave it – but we are not told precisely “where” that location is. However, the spirits of the wicked and unjust are kept in a part of *hades* or *sheol*, which is the “abode of the dead,” until the day of final judgment. Thus these surviving “spirits” continue in existence, even after the body itself dies and becomes dust of the earth.

What do we know about these “spirits” of the dead? The Scriptures in Isaiah 14 indicates that they are suspended in stasis, a state of inability to do anything, but even so it would appear that they possess a degree of consciousness and awareness, as the spirits of the kings of the world, long since deceased, discern the death of the king of Babylon when his spirit joins them in Sheol.

On the other hand, what about the spirits of the deceased righteous? Where do they go? They also go to the place known as ‘Sheol,’ which simply defines the “abode of the dead.

The Righteous Dead

As we already read in the book of Revelation, during the future Great Tribulation, soon to come upon the earth, the souls of the righteous dead will be disturbed from their slumber, and will cry out to God in deep concern, awaiting their resurrection.

Notice once again: “When He opened the fifth seal, I saw *under the altar the SOULS of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those*

who dwell on the earth?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should *REST a little longer*, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed” (Rev.6:9-11).

These were dead saints. Yet their souls are pictured as crying out to God with a “loud voice”! They are obviously aware, and able to “think,” and to express their emotions and feelings to God.

What an interesting Scripture!

When we come to understand that there indeed IS a “spirit in man” which survives the first, physical death, and that the “spirit” continues in existence, then we should be able to discern these Scriptures for what they are REALLY saying! As king Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, these spirits cannot “work,” “plan,” “plot,” or perform any activities of any kind (Eccl.9:10). They are distinctly limited in what they can do. But, on the other hand, they can in a limited way speak, discern their surroundings, and communicate with each other, when necessary, and the spirits of the righteous can even communicate with God, when appropriate, or when He allows it!

“Heavenly Jerusalem”

The apostle Paul tells those who are true Christians, and followers of the Christ, the Messiah, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the judge of all, *TO THE SPIRITS OF JUST MEN MADE PERFECT*, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (Heb.12:22-24).

These “spirits of just men made perfect” are the spirits of the righteous dead, from the prophets of old to the saints, who served God and who died, and who are waiting now for the coming of the Messiah, from the abode of the dead, where they are waiting, till He comes again in great glory to take His kingdom! They are waiting, patiently, for that time when their spirits, preserved and reserved and protected by God, are reunited with a **NEW BODY**, fashioned in glory, at the resurrection of the dead, and then they, too, will come with Christ to **RULE** over the kingdoms of the world, the nations upon the earth!

Thus it is not true to say that the “dead” are totally “unconscious.” That would be an overstatement -- or a misstatement of the facts. Rather, they are in a condition of stasis, with limited ability and consciousness, UNTIL their spirit is reunited with a body.

When Christ returns, the **DEAD IN CHRIST** will rise to meet Him and join Him in His kingdom (I Thess.4:14-17). One thousand years *later*, the **REST** of the dead will rise up from their graves, and

be re-joined with their spirits, to undergo the awesome experience of the day of the “great white throne judgment” (Rev.20:11-15).

“Desire to Depart”

When we see these truths, then the words of the apostle Paul become even more clear, and resonate with our own spirit. Paul declared, with great joy and exhilaration, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is GAIN. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, *having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better*. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you” (Philippians 1:21-24).

Paul wanted to have his life’s travails and toils to be over – completed – and for his spirit to be with Christ. That desire he considered to be “gain” – much better for him, personally. He knew that when he died, his spirit would go immediately to God, to His Presence, to the assembly of the spirits of the saints of God in the heavenly Jerusalem, before God’s very own Throne! So he eagerly desired to go there, having suffered much in the flesh, as Christ’s apostle.

But Paul saw the need for him to remain on the earth a little longer, serving and teaching and instructing God’s people, before his death. So he was content to do that, although his own desire was to depart as soon as possible to be with Christ – that is, for his spirit to be with the spirits of the saints in heaven, at God’s throne, surrounded by innumerable angels, as he said in Hebrews, chapter 12.

In the past, assuming that the dead were completely unconscious and “dead” until the resurrection, and not understanding about the “spirit in man,” I assumed – as others taught – that Paul meant that he merely looked forward to the resurrection of the dead, which would occur at Christ’s second coming. But *that is not what he said!* It may be true that if a person is totally unconscious from death till the resurrection, that the next moment would *seem* as if it occurred instantly, after death – even though it might be thousands of years later. But Paul *knew* that he had a *spirit* which was his very own character imprint, and that it would return to *God upon his death!* The context of Philippians, chapter 1, clearly suggests – almost demands – that we understand this passage to be referring to Paul’s desire to “be with Christ” upon his own death – in a *literal sense!*

Our “House” from Heaven

Paul also spoke of this great desire in II Corinthians, chapter 5. He wrote, “For we know that if our earthly house, this tent [our human body], is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (verse 1). Note that in the original Greek there were no commas; therefore, this verse really says that this “house” or “body” made by God, without human hands, is “eternal,” and is currently being reserved for us “in the heavens.” It does not mean that that new body or house will remain eternally in the heavens, for we will be clothed with it and then return to the EARTH, with Jesus when He comes in glory (I Thess.4:14-17).

Going on, Paul said, “For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation [margin, “dwelling”] which is FROM heaven, if indeed, being clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tent [this present human body] groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit [the begetting of His Holy Spirit] as a guarantee [margin, “down payment, earnest”].

“So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be ABSENT FROM THE BODY [this present body and life] AND TO BE PRESENT WITH THE LORD. Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (II Cor.5:2-10).

Isn't this plain? Paul said that when we are “absent from the body” – that is, dead – we will be “PRESENT WITH THE LORD”! It certainly does not sound as if he was referring to waiting thousands of years before being “present with the Lord,” but IMMEDIATELY!

I personally believe that these verses speak quite clearly that when we die, the spirits of the righteous, the servants of God, go up to heaven, to God's Throne, and remain there protected and secured by God under His altar in heaven, until the time of the return of Christ and His glorious Kingdom. At that time, the spirits of the righteous will be given NEW bodies, and will return with Christ in amazing glory and awesome power to bring into being the Millennial Kingdom of the Messiah!

Does This Mean the Soul of Man Is “Immortal”?

Since spirit is the essence of life, and cannot die, does this mean that mankind has an “immortal soul”? Of course, many religions teach that mankind does have an “immortal soul.” But this statement is also off the mark and not true.

First of all, we read in Scripture that only God has “immortality.” Man is plainly said to be “mortal,” and is capable of death – his life being extinguished. Notice! The apostle Paul declared, Jesus Christ is “the blessed and only Potentate [“Sovereign,” margin], the King of kings and Lord of lords, *who alone has immortality*, dwelling in the unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen” (I Tim.6:15-16).

When men die, their spirit is preserved by God to await the final day of judgment. When that day arrives, the righteous will indeed be made immortal! This proves that we do not yet possess immortality! Paul wrote, again, “For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must put on immortality*. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and *this mortal has PUT ON immortality*, *THEN shall be brought to pass* the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (I Cor.15:53-54).

At the resurrection, the saints of God will BECOME immortal!

But what about the wicked, whose spirits are also in the control of God? When the day of judgment arrives, God will rejoin their spirits with their own physical, corruptible bodies – they too will be resurrected! But they won't be given glorious, new, immortal bodies. Instead, we read of them: "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works. . . . And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the *lake of fire*" (Rev.20:11-15).

What will happen to the wicked? John continues in the next chapter, "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the *lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the SECOND DEATH*" (Rev.21:8).

This is the fate of the incorrigible wicked! Jesus Himself said that the wicked will be told, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt.25:41). This is the fire known as "Gehenna." It will consume the wicked, till they are nothing but smoke and ashes.

The prophet Malachi wrote of this great day, "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall *burn them up*, says the LORD of hosts, that it will leave them neither root or branch. But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall *trample the wicked, for they shall be ASHES under the soles of your feet* on the day that I do this, says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi 4:1-3).

This great Gehenna fire is an age-ending fire. It will consume all the wicked. Those who are consumed in its flames will perish forever, never again to be resurrected or come to life. Thus its effects will be "eternal" and "everlasting." However, this does not mean that the fire itself will burn forever and ever. Like all fires, it will burn only so long as there is anything left to be burned! When all the "fuel" is consumed, then it will burn itself out!

Although the fire which consumed the wicked is called "everlasting fire" in Matthew 25:41, the Greek word for "everlasting" in this verse is *aiionios* and can be understood as applying to past time, future time, both past and future together, eternity, or world. In what sense is this fire going to be "everlasting"? In its results!

The same word is used in the book of Jude, where we read of the fire that destroyed ancient Sodom and Gomorrah: "Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities round about them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of *ETERNAL FIRE*" (Jude 7).

Now, the fires that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah totally consumed and obliterated those ancient cities. The effect has lasted from that day to this. But those fires are not still burning, today! The site of ancient Sodom and Gomorrah, south and west of the Dead Sea, is today a wasteland and desert. The fires expired many thousands of years ago, when their job was accomplished!

The Wicked

What will happen, then, to the spirits of the wicked? When their bodies are consumed in the age-ending fiery holocaust, the wicked will perish. Their spirits will return to God and – I believe – will be cleansed and purified, in the flames of the final judgment. They will return to God, to be used by Him, with no memories or consciousness of any sort of their former lives in the flesh, for those memories and experiences will at that time be forever erased and obliterated.

Nothing will be left of those people, or their memories, or consciousness. The spirits will return to God, purified and whole and renewed – with a new existence as it were, a new “slate.” In other words, the spirits of the wicked will be *RE-CYCLED!* All will return to God, who created them in the first place, and who wastes nothing. God is the perfect re-cycler. All came from Him and all will return to Him, one way or the other! (Compare I Corinthians 15:24-28).

Peter tells us of that fateful day: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless” (II Peter 3:10-14).

The spirits of the wicked will be purified and rehabilitated in that age-ending cosmic holocaust which destroys all the works of the wicked, in which the present heavens and earth will be consumed, purged, and cleansed.

Then God will begin once again, with NEW heavens and a NEW earth, in which only righteousness will dwell! Praise God for His marvelous, inestimable Plan!

May you and I be counted worthy to inherit that wondrous New World of everlasting joy, happiness, comfort, and peace!

If you would like to study this subject further, then be sure to write for our free articles, “What Is the Spirit in Man?”, “What Is This Place Called Hell?”, and “Satan’s Fate – Will He Be Tormented Forever?”