

The Hope of Immortality

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One of the most important questions facing Christian believers today regards the subject of immortality. The word "immortality" is defined as the quality of living forever; never dying; or having everlasting life. Although the word "immortality" is not found that many times in the Bible, the concept of living forever, never dying, or having everlasting life is set forth many times in the Scriptures. John 3:16 is a very familiar example:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16; Scripture verses are from KJV unless otherwise noted).

Since the Bible obviously has much to say about the subject of immortality we must ask: does the Bible present immortality as something that is *conditional* or does it set it forth as something that is *innate*? The word "conditional" is defined as "containing a condition; depending on something else; qualified; made on certain terms." Many parents make promises to their children such as, "If you graduate from high school, I will give you an automobile." In this promise receiving the automobile is *conditional* on the person graduating from high school. The promise is made on certain terms. It's qualified. It's *not* unconditional.

The word "innate" is contrasted with "conditional." The word "innate" means "inborn; natural; not acquired." It's what you have by reason of birth. That's the difference between something that is conditional and something that is innate, or something that you have within yourself by reason of birth.

So is immortality something we are born with? Are we born immortal? Are we born with a quality of living forever, never dying or having everlasting life? Do we have that by virtue of being a human being? Or, is immortality something that is conditional - something that is not natural to us, something that depends on something else, something that is qualified or is made on certain

terms? How does the Bible set forth immortality? Let's turn our Bibles to I John 2:15-17:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever (I John 2:15-17).

Look closely at verse 17 and see if this verse is setting forth an *innate* immortality, something that man is born with. Or, is it setting forth a *conditional* immortality that man can attain if he meets certain conditions or requirements? The word immortality is not there but the expression "abideth for ever" means the same thing. Anything that abides forever is everlasting. Is the immortality that is set forth here something that one has automatically? No. John says, "... he that doeth the will of God *abideth forever*." Well, if all men were to abide forever whether they do the will of God or not, then what John says in that verse is misleading. Because here he says that in order to abide forever, we must *do* something. We must *do the will of God* in order to abide forever.

The Bible teaches that God is immortal but that human beings are mortal, not immortal. Look at Romans chapter one:

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (Rom. 1:22-23 NIV).

If immortal means the quality of living forever, never dying or having everlasting life, then mortal is just the opposite of that. Mortal would be not living forever; it would be dying or, being subject to death. Simply put, that which is mortal does not innately possess everlasting life.

The Old Testament View of Man

Let's go to the beginning where God created mankind. I think we can learn something about the nature of man by what is said concerning Adam. Let's look at Genesis chapter three and pick up the story in verse 17. This is just after Adam and Eve

committed sin and God is appearing to them and pronouncing a judgment on them as a result of their sin.

And unto Adam he said, "Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, 'thou shalt not eat of it:' cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:17-19).

Notice what God tells Adam is going to happen to him. He is going to return into the ground, "for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." The word "thou" (the modern versions would have "you") is referring to Adam as a person. Adam is going to return unto the ground, to the dust. Look further at Genesis 3:

And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them. And the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken" (Gen. 3:20-23).

So why did God put Adam out of the garden? To prevent him from putting forth his hand and tasting of the tree of life and eating and living for ever. Would Adam have lived forever without partaking of that tree of life, whatever is involved in that? No, he wouldn't. The way Adam could have lived forever is partaking of that tree of life, whatever is involved in that. God put him out of the garden lest he partake of that tree of life and live forever. Adam wasn't created with the ability to live forever. There was an *opportunity* for him to live forever. If he had been obedient to God, if he had served God, then that tree of life would have been open to him and he could have eaten of it and lived forever. Because of sin, God put him out of the garden so he couldn't eat of that tree and live

forever. Living forever was something conditional on his *obedience*, on his *faithfulness* to God. But because of his *unfaithfulness*, he was put out of the garden so he couldn't partake of that tree. The judgment pronounced on him was that he would return to the dust from which God created him.

Look at Job chapter 4 and verse 17. This is a statement by Eliphaz, one of the friends of Job who had come to comfort Job in his misery. Eliphaz is raising a question here,

*"Shall mortal man be more just than God?
Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?"
(Job. 4:17).*

I think it is obvious that the answer to the question is "No." Man shall not be more just than God and man shall not be more pure than his Maker. Notice how Eliphaz describes man in this verse - "Shall *mortal* man be more just than God?" Eliphaz had the idea that man is mortal. Man is subject to death. Man is not immortal. We might be thinking, "Well, that is just Eliphaz's opinion that man is mortal." Let's see if Job himself thought that. Look at Job chapter 14:

*"Man that is born of a woman is of few days,
and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a
flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a
shadow, and continueth not" (Job 14:1-2).*

Notice how Job is describing man. Job is saying that man is *not* going to live forever. Man is just going to live a few days and he is going to die. Let's pick it up at verse 10 and read a few verses. Notice how Job describes man whenever he dies:

*But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man
giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the
waters fail from the sea, and the flood
decayeth and drieth up; So man lieth down,
and riseth not: till the heavens be no more,
they shall not awake, nor be raised out of
their sleep. Oh, that thou wouldest hide me
in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me
secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou
wouldest appoint me a set time, and
remember me? If a man die, shall he live
again? All the days of my appointed time
will I wait, till my change come" (Job 14:10-14).*

That's a tremendous question Job asked: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" You can paraphrase

Job's question and put it like this: "If a man dies, is he *really* dead?" I say that he is and Job's question is, if a man dies shall he live again? The word "again" means "once more." Job's hope was that sometime in the future that he would live again. What would the state of man between the time he would die and the time he would live again. Notice in verse 12 he says, "So man lieth down, and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not *awake* or be raised out of their *sleep*." So that is the state man is in between death and resurrection. Job's hope for a future life was not that he would live on and on and not die. Instead, his hope was in the fact that he would live *again* in the resurrection.

The New Testament View of Man

Does the New Testament set forth the same view about man as the Old Testament; that is, that man is mortal and subject to death? Look at James chapter 4 and notice the way James puts it:

Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away (James 4:13-15).

Notice the way James states this: "For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away." The modern versions make it even more plain. Instead of saying, "It is even a vapor," they have, "You are even a vapor." You are a mist or a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Notice it doesn't say your *body* is just a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away; it says *you* are. The King James version has "It is even a vapor ..." but the modern versions have "*You* are ..." You, the person, the personality, are a vapor.

Human beings then are mortal, not immortal. Immortality is something we seek and must put on. We don't have it, but we are seeking for it and we must "put it on." Look at Romans 2:6-7. It's speaking of the time of judgment when God will render to all their due:

Who will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and

honor and immortality, he will give eternal life (Rom. 2:6-7).

Notice what people are to seek for: glory, honor and immortality. What will God render to us, what will He give us, the ones who are seeking for immortality? Eternal life!! The ones seeking for immortality will get it. You don't seek for something that you already have or already possess. We're seeking for immortality and God is going to render it to us.

Look at I Corinthians 15. Paul tells us we must "put on" immortality:

Behold, I show 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 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. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (I Cor. 15:51-54).

When will death be swallowed up in victory? When will we gain the victory over death? Only when we *put on* immortality - at the time of Christ's return and the resurrection day. The word "incorruptible" means that it is not subject to decay. The resurrection body will be incorruptible, not subject to decay. The one we have now is mortal, subject to death. The one we will get at Christ's return is immortal, *not* subject to death.

Immortality is something we are *seeking* and must *put on*. We don't have it now. In the light of this we must state that human beings are mortal. There is no such thing as an "immortal soul." Instead, the Hebrew and Greek words sometimes translated "soul" define something that can die. The soul is mortal, the soul can die. Look at Ezekial 18:4 in the King James Version:

Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die (Ezekial 18:4).

God said, "All souls are mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die." Notice the first sentence in verse 20: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." We see that two times in Ezekial the scriptures state that the soul can die. Look at James chapter 5:

Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul [i.e., a person] from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (James 5:20).

When you convert somebody, what do you do? You save a soul, or a person, from death. That's what people are saved from. What about the souls not saved from death? They will die. God says in Ezekial that it shall. But you can be saved from that death by obeying the gospel.

Only God has Absolute Immortality

Only God has absolute immortality - no beginning and no end of existence and life. Look at Psalm 90:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God (Psalm 90:1-2).

So before the earth existed, there was a God. After the earth is gone, there will be a God: "from everlasting to everlasting". This is hard for us to comprehend. We're so time oriented and time conscious. We're so conditioned to things having a beginning and coming to an end, that it is hard for us to imagine something that didn't have a beginning and will not have an end. Yet, that is the way the Bible presents God.

I remember several years back when my oldest daughter Terry was about 6 or 7 years old and we were coming back from the church service. Something she heard that day prompted her to ask the question, "Where did God come from?" It surprised me that a child so young would ask that question and so I answered it something like this: "God has always existed; He didn't have a beginning." She didn't reply for a while and I thought she had forgotten about it. Then she spoke out and said, "You know, that is something to think about: God has always existed." That was pushing a six-year old mind to the limit. It can even push *our* minds to the limit. I don't care how much

education one has, that can stagger the mind; to try to comprehend something that had *no beginning* and will have *no end*.

Look at Isaiah chapter 57. Here God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah:

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones (Isaiah 57:15).

Notice especially the first part of that verse. God inhabiteth eternity. He lives in eternity. God is eternal. Look also at I Timothy chapter 6:

I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; that thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall show, Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord or lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; Whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to Whom be honor and power everlasting. Amen" (I Tim. 6:13-16).

Notice in describing God in verse 16 that Paul states: "Who *only* has immortality." If angels have eternal life and we can receive eternal life through the gospel, why does it say only God has immortality? Because only God has *absolute* immortality - no beginning and no end of existence. Other beings receive life from God. God had no beginning and he will have no ending. Everything else came into existence as a result of God's creative work, including both angelic beings and human beings. God is thus the fountain or source of all life. Look at Psalm 36. Here David is describing something about God:

For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light (Psalm 36:9).

Why would God be called the fountain of life? I think the word "fountain" here is used in the sense of "source." God is the source, or He is the origin of

life. Just as a fountain is the source of water, so God is the source of life.

Let's look at some examples of God giving eternal life. Let's start with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus came he came as a man so that he could die for the sins of man. Hebrews 2:9 says,

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man (Heb. 2:9).

Notice in verse 9 that Jesus was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death. Jesus was born as a man so that he might die. Look at verses 14-16:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he [the Lord Jesus] also himself likewise took part of the same [he took part of flesh and blood]; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil. And deliver them, who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham (Heb. 2:14-16).

Jesus was born as a man. The nature he possessed was not the nature of angels, composed of spirit, but it was the nature of man, the seed of Abraham. The reason he was made flesh was so that he would be able to die. But God raised Jesus from the dead - never to die again. When Jesus was resurrected, he was resurrected not to mortal human life anymore. He was resurrected to an *immortal* state - never to die again.

Look at Revelation chapter one. Here Jesus is speaking to John when he appeared to him on the Isle of Patmos. This is what he tells John:

"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Rev. 1:18).

Notice the phrase, "I am alive for evermore." Jesus lived as a man and died as a man, but he didn't stay dead. God raised him from the dead and he is alive for evermore. He was resurrected to immortality, never to die again. He is the first one to experience

that type of resurrection. That is why Paul refers to Jesus as "the firstfruits of them that slept" (I Cor. 15:20).

There are many examples of physical resurrection in the Scriptures. There were those whom Jesus raised from the dead during his earthly ministry such as Lazarus and the daughter of Jarius. The apostles also raised people from the dead. Why then does the Bible say that Jesus is the *first* that was raised from the dead (Acts 26:23)? The answer is clear: Jesus was raised to *immortality* - never to die again. All of these others were raised back to mortal life. That's why Lazarus and Dorcas and others are not around today. They were raised back to normal, mortal, physical life and they experienced death again at some later time. But Jesus was raised to immortality, never to die again. That's also what we will experience at our resurrection (I Cor. 15:50-54).

Look at Romans chapter 6:9-10. This is a description of the state the Lord Jesus is in since he experienced that resurrection.

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once; but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God (Rom. 6:9-10).

Why doesn't death have any dominion, reign or rule over Jesus? Because Jesus was raised to immortality and a being that has immortality can never die. Instead, Jesus has everlasting life - he will live forever. Death simply can't touch someone who is immortal.

Immortality: God's Conditional Gift to Mankind

My final point is that eternal life, or immortality, is God's *conditional* gift to mankind. Look at Psalm 21:4. Here David is speaking of the king that would be rejoicing in the Lord:

He asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even length of days for ever and ever (Psalm 21:4).

Here is a king that is asking God for life. What kind of life? Eternal life, God is going to give people eternal life. Notice how it is described: "even length of days for ever and ever." This is a good definition of eternal life: Length of days for ever and ever. Notice in the verse, however, that God had to *give*

this to man. Romans 6:23 is a key passage in this regard. It sets forth several important truths:

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

What does sin result in? What are the consequences, or the wages, of sin? Wages is something you earn, something you work for, something that you have coming to you. God is going to pay the wages of sin - which is death. But look at the contrast: "But the gift of God is eternal life." Eternal life is a gift that comes from God. Man doesn't possess it by nature. He isn't born with this eternal life. Man isn't born with immortality. It's a gift from God. But does God give it to everybody? No! Its received only through our Lord Jesus Christ. Only the ones that are in the right relationship with Jesus Christ are going to get it. John tells us this very clearly in his first Letter:

And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life (I John 5:11-12).

Notice that this life is not in some denominational church. It's not in some man-made organization. This eternal life is in God's Son. It is a gift from God but you must be in right relationship with the Son in order to receive it. Eternal life is a *conditional* gift from God received through believing in his Son. It is not something that is innate or inborn. Instead, only those who "have the Son, have life."

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