

Immortality of the Soul

BY LOUIS BERKHOF

In the preceding it was pointed out that physical death is the separation of body and soul and marks the end of our present physical existence. It necessarily involves and results in the decomposition of the body. It marks the end of our present life and the end of the "natural body." But now the question arises, What becomes of the soul: does or does it continue to exist and live on after death? It has always been the firm conviction of the Church of Jesus Christ that the soul continues to live even after its separation from the body. This doctrine of the immortality of the soul calls for brief consideration at this point.

A. DIFFERENT CONNOTATIONS OF THE TERM "IMMORTALITY."

In a discussion of the doctrine of immortality it should be borne in mind that the term "immortality" is not always used in the same sense. There are certain distinctions that are quite essential, in order to prevent confusion.

1. In the most absolute sense of the word immortality is ascribed only to God. Paul speaks of Him in I Tim. 6:15,16 as "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, *who only hath immortality.*" This does not mean that none of His creatures are immortal in any sense of the word. Understood in that unrestricted sense, this word of Paul would also teach that the angels are not immortal, and this is certainly not the intention of the apostle. The evident meaning of his statement is that God is the only being who possesses immortality "as an original, eternal, and necessary endowment." Whatever immortality may be ascribed to some of His creatures, is contingent on the divine will, is conferred upon them, and therefore had a beginning. God, on the other hand, is necessarily free from all temporal limitations.

2. Immortality in the sense of continuous or endless existence is also ascribed to all spirits, including the human soul. It is one of the doctrines of natural religion or philosophy that, when the body is dissolved, the soul does not share in its dissolution, but retains its identity as an individual being. This idea of the immortality of the soul is in perfect harmony with what the Bible teaches about man, but the Bible, religion, and theology, are not primarily interested in this purely quantitative and colourless immortality, — the bare continued existence of the soul.

3. Again, the term "immortality" is used in theological language to designate that state of man in which he is entirely free from the seeds of decay and death. In this sense of the word man was immortal before the fall. This state clearly did not exclude the possibility of man's becoming subject to death. Though man in the state of rectitude was not subject to death, yet he was liable to it. It was entirely possible that through sin he would become subject to the law of death; and as a matter of fact he did fall a victim to it.

4. Finally, the word "immortality" designates, especially in eschatological language, that state of man in which he is impervious to death and cannot possibly become its prey. Man was not immortal in this highest sense of the word in virtue of his creation, even though he was created in the image of God. This immortality would have resulted if Adam had complied with the condition of the covenant of works, but can now only result from the work of redemption as it is completed in the consummation.

B. TESTIMONY OF GENERAL REVELATION TO THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.

The question of Job, "If a man die, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14) is one of perennial interest. And with it the question constantly recurs, whether the dead still live. The answer to this question has practically always been an affirmative one. Though evolutionists cannot admit that faith in the immortality of the soul is an original endowment of man, yet it cannot be denied that this faith is all but universal, and is found even in the lowest forms of religion. Under the influence of materialism many have been inclined to doubt and even to deny the future life of man. Yet this negative attitude is not the prevailing one. In a recent Symposium on "Immortality," containing the views of about a hundred representative men, the opinions are practically unanimous in favour of a future life. The historical and philosophical arguments for the immortality of the soul are not absolutely conclusive, but certainly are important testimonies to the continued personal and conscious existence of man. They are the following.

1. THE HISTORICAL ARGUMENT. The *consensus gentium* is just as strong in connection with the immortality of the soul, as it is with reference to the existence of God. There always have been unbelieving scholars who denied the continued existence of man, but in general it may be said that belief in the immortality of the soul is found among all races and nations, no matter what their stage of civilization may be. And it would seem that a notion so common can only be regarded as a natural instinct or as something involved in the very constitution of human nature.

2. THE METAPHYSICAL ARGUMENT. This argument is based on the simplicity of the human soul, and infers from this its indissolubility. In death matter is dissolved into its parts. But the soul as a spiritual entity is not composed of various parts, and is therefore incapable of division or dissolution. Consequently, the decomposition of the body does not carry with it the destruction of the soul. Even when the former perishes, the latter remains intact. This argument is very old and was already used by Plato.

3. THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT. Human beings seem to be endowed with almost infinite capabilities, which are never fully developed in this life. It seems as if most men only just begin to accomplish some of the great things to which they aspire. There are ideals that fall far short of realization, appetites and desires that are not satisfied in this life, yearnings and aspirations that are disappointed. Now it is argued that God would not have conferred upon men such abilities and talents, only to make them fail in their achievements, would not have filled the heart with such desires and aspirations, only to disappoint them. He must have provided a future existence, in which human life will come to fruition.

4. THE MORAL ARGUMENT. The human conscience testifies to the existence of a moral Ruler of the universe who will exercise justice. Yet the demands of justice are not met in this present life. There is a very unequal and seemingly unjust distribution of good and evil. The wicked often prosper, increase in riches, and have an abundant share of the joys of life, while the pious frequently live in poverty, meet with painful and humiliating reverses, and suffer many afflictions. Hence there must be a future state of existence, in which justice will reign supreme, and the inequalities of the present will be adjusted.

C. TESTIMONY OF SPECIAL REVELATION TO THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.

The historical and philosophical proofs for the survival of the soul are not absolutely demonstrative, and therefore do not compel belief. For greater assurance in this matter, it is necessary to direct the eye of faith to Scripture. Here, too, we must rely on the voice of authority. Now the position of Scripture with respect to this matter may at first seem somewhat dubious. It speaks of God as the only one who hath immortality (I Tim. 6:15), and never predicates this of man. There is no explicit mention of the immortality of the soul, and much less any attempt to prove it in a formal way. Hence the Russellites or Millennial Dawnists often challenge theologians to point to a single passage in which the Bible teaches that the soul of man is immortal. But even if the Bible does not explicitly state that the soul of man is immortal, and does not seek to prove this in a formal way, any more than it seeks to present formal proof for the existence of God, this does not mean that Scripture denies or contradicts or even ignores it. It clearly assumes in many passages that man continues his conscious existence after death. In fact, it treats the truth of the immortality of man very much as it does that of the existence of God, that is, it assumes this as an undisputed postulate.

1. THE DOCTRINE OF IMMORTALITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. The assertion has been made repeatedly that the Old Testament, and particularly the Pentateuch, does not teach in any way the immortality of the soul. Now it is perfectly true that this great truth is revealed less clearly in the Old than in the New Testament; but the facts in the case do not warrant the assertion that it is absent from the Old Testament altogether. It is a well-known and generally recognized fact that God's revelation in Scripture is progressive and gradually increases in clearness; and it stands to reason that the doctrine of immortality in the sense of a blessed eternal life, could only be revealed in all its bearings after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who "brought life and immortality to light," II Tim. 1:10. But while all this is true, it cannot be denied that the Old Testament implies the continued conscious existence of man, either in the sense of a bare immortality or survival of the soul, or of a blessed future life, in several ways. This is implied:

a. *In its doctrine of God and man.* The very root of Israel's hope of immortality was found in its belief in God as its Creator and Redeemer, its covenant God, who would never fail them. He was to them the living, the eternal, the faithful God, in whose fellowship they found joy, life, peace, and perfect satisfaction. Would they have panted after Him as they did, have entrusted themselves to Him completely in life and death, and have sung of Him as their portion forever, if they felt that all He offered them was but for a brief span of time? How could they derive real comfort from the promised redemption of God, if they regarded death as the end of their existence? Moreover, the Old Testament represents man as created in the image of God, created for life and not for mortality. In distinction from the brute, he possesses a life that transcends time and already contains within itself a pledge of immortality. He is made for communion with God, is but little lower than the angels, and God has set eternity in his heart, Eccl. 3:11.

b. *In its doctrine of sheol.* We are taught in the Old Testament that the dead descend into *sheol*. The discussion of this doctrine belongs to the following chapter. But whatever may be the proper interpretation of the Old Testament *sheol*, and whatever may be said of the condition of those who have descended into it, this is certainly represented as a state of more or less conscious existence, though not one of bliss. Man enters upon the state of perfect bliss only by a deliverance from *sheol*. In this deliverance we reach the real core of the Old Testament hope of a blessed immortality. This is clearly taught in several passages, such as Ps. 16:10; 49:14,15.

c. *In its frequent warnings against consulting the dead or "familiar spirits,"* that is, persons who were able to summon the spirits of the dead and to convey their messages to the inquirers, Lev. 19:31; 20:27; Deut. 18:11; Isa. 8:19; 29:4. Scripture does not say that it is impossible to consult the dead, but rather seems to presuppose the possibility while it condemns the practice.

d. *In its teachings respecting the resurrection of the dead.* This doctrine is not explicitly taught in the earlier books of the Old Testament. Christ points out, however, that it was taught by implication in the statement, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," Matt. 22:32, cf. Ex. 3:6, and chides the Jews for not understanding the Scriptures on this point. Moreover, the doctrine of the resurrection is explicitly taught in such passages as Job 19:23-27; Ps. 16:9-11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2.

e. *In certain striking Old Testament passages which speak of the believer's enjoyment in communion with God after death.* These are in the main identical with the passages referred to in the preceding, namely, Job 19:25-27; Ps. 16:9-11; 17:15; 73:23,24,26. They breathe the confident expectation of pleasures in the presence of Jehovah.

2. THE DOCTRINE OF IMMORTALITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. In the New Testament, after Christ has brought life and immortality to light, the proofs naturally multiply. The passages that contain these may again be divided into various classes, as referring:

a. *To the survival of the soul.* A continued existence of both the righteous and the wicked is clearly taught. That the souls of believers survive, appears from such passages as Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:43; John 11:25 f.; 14:3; II Cor. 5:1; and several other passages make it quite evident that the same can be said of the souls of the wicked, Matt. 11:21-24; 12:41; Rom. 2:5-11; II Cor. 5:10.

b. *To the resurrection by which the body is also made to share in the future existence.* For believers the resurrection means the redemption of the body and entrance into the perfect life in communion with God, the full blessedness of immortality. This resurrection is taught in Luke 20:35,36; John 5:25-29; I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:16; Phil. 3:21, and other passages. For the wicked the resurrection will also mean a renewed and continued existence of the body, but this can hardly be called life. Scripture calls it eternal death. The resurrection of the wicked is mentioned in John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:12-15.

c. *To the blessed life of believers in communion with God.* There are numerous passages in the New Testament which stress the fact that the immortality of believers is not a bare endless existence, but a rapturous life of bliss in communion with God and with Jesus Christ, in the full fruition of the life that is implanted in the soul while still on earth. This is clearly emphasized in such passages as Matt. 13:43; 25:34; Rom. 2:7,10; I Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3:21; II Tim. 4:8; Rev. 21:4; 22:3,4.

D. OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF PERSONAL IMMORTALITY AND MODERN SUBSTITUTES FOR IT.

1. THE MAIN OBJECTION TO IT. Belief in the immortality of the soul for a time suffered a decline under the influence of a materialistic philosophy. The main argument against it was forged in the workshop of physiological psychology, and runs somewhat as follows: The mind or the soul has no independent substantial existence, but is simply a product or function of brain activity. The brain of man is the producing cause of mental phenomena, just as the liver is the producing cause of bile. The function cannot persist when the organ decays. When the brain ceases to operate, the stream of mental life comes to a stop.

2. SUBSTITUTES FOR THE DOCTRINE OF PERSONAL IMMORTALITY. The desire for immortality is so deeply implanted in the human soul that even those who accept the dicta of a materialistic science, seek some sort of substitute for the discarded notion of the personal immortality of the soul. Their hope for the future assumes one of the following forms:

a. *Racial immortality.* There are those who comfort themselves with the idea that the individual will continue to live on this earth in his posterity, in his children and grandchildren, to endless generations. The individual seeks compensation for his lack of hope in a personal immortality in the notion that he lives on in his progeny, to the life of the race and will continue to live on in that. But the idea that a man contributes to his share, whatever the modicum of truth it may contain, can hardly serve as a substitute for the doctrine of personal immortality. It certainly does not do justice to the data of Scripture, and does not satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

b. *Immortality of commemoration.* According to Positivism this is the only immortality we should desire and look for. Everyone should aim at doing something to establish a name for himself, which will go down in the annals of history. If he does this, he will continue to live in the hearts and minds of a grateful posterity. This also falls far short of the personal immortality which Scripture leads us to expect. Moreover, it is an immortality in which only a few will share. The names of most men are not recorded on the pages of history, and many of those who are so recorded are soon forgotten. And to a great extent it may be said that the best and the worst share it alike.

c. *Immortality of influence.* This is very closely related to the preceding. If a man makes his mark in life, and accomplishes something that is of enduring value, his influence will continue long after he is gone. Jesus and Paul, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, — they are all very much alive in the influence which they exercise up to the present time. While this is perfectly true, this immortality of influence is but a poor substitute for personal immortality. All the objections that were raised against the immortality of commemoration, also apply in this case.

3. THE RECOVERY OF FAITH IN IMMORTALITY. At the present time the materialistic interpretation of the universe is making way for a more spiritual interpretation; and as a result faith in personal immortality is once more gaining favor. Dr. William James, while subscribing to the formula, "Thought is a function of the brain," denies that this logically compels us to disbelieve the doctrine of immortality. He maintains that this conclusion of the scientists is based on the mistaken notion that the function of which the formula speaks is necessarily a *productive* function, and points out that it may also be a *permissive* or *transmissive* function. The brain may merely transmit, and in the transmission colour, thought, just as a coloured glass, a prism, or a refracting lens, may transmit light and at the same time determine its colour and direction. The light exists independent of the glass or lens; so thought also exists independent of the brain. He comes to the conclusion that one can, in strict logic, believe in immortality. Some evolutionists now base the doctrine of conditional immortality on the struggle for existence. And such scientists as William James, Sir Oliver Lodge, and James H. Hyslop, attach great significance to reputed communications with the dead. On the basis of psychic phenomena the first was inclined to believe in immortality, while the other two embraced it as an established fact.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY: Is the doctrine of immortality found in the Pentateuch? What accounts for the comparative scarcity of proofs for it in the Old Testament? On what did Plato base his belief in the immortality of the soul? How did Kant judge of the usual natural arguments for the doctrine of immortality? Is there any place for belief in personal immortality in either Materialism or Pantheism? Why does the doctrine of so-called "social immortality" fail to satisfy? Is the immortality of the soul in the philosophical sense the same as eternal life? How should we judge of the reputed spiritualistic communications with the dead?

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