

## **The Nature of the Soul**

### *Choosing Between Spiritualism and the Gospel*

Soon after moving into their family's new rental home in 1848, two little girls named Maggie and Kate Fox began to hear a mysterious rapping on the wall. After a time, the girls began to communicate with the rapping ghosts, who even answered specific questions. Within days, travelers began showing up at the house, wanting to converse with the dead rappers. Maggie and Kate gave themselves to communicating with the dead, conducting séances, and making money as celebrity mediums. They called themselves "the spiritualists."

This was the first time that many had seen spiritualism overtly coupled with Christianity to form a hybrid religion. Some began to believe that communicating with the dead showed evidence of deep spirituality. This is strange, considering the Biblical warnings against it:

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer; or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations the Lord your God drives them out from before you.  
Deuteronomy 18:10-12

God would fortify us against witchcraft and other dark arts. But many Christians operate from a basic assumption that weakens them to such deceptions. They misunderstand the nature of the soul. To regain that understanding, let's take a journey. We'll go back to the soul in the garden, stop for a moment at the soul in death and resurrection, then land on the soul in history. It will be a soulful time.

### **The Soul in the Garden**

As the freshly-created Adam and Eve explored their new Eden home, God showed them two trees. One was the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:17), of which they were not to eat. The other was the "tree of life," the fruit of which would cause them to "live forever" (Genesis 3:22).

The tree of life tells us that, in order to live, we humans must partake of something outside of ourselves. In other words, immortality comes to us from an external source.

One being and only One possesses "natural immortality," and that is God (1 Timothy 6:16). The rest of God's creatures thrive only as He imparts His life to them. In God we "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

At the creation, God "formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7, KJV). There are three parts of human nature presented in this verse. First, God made man's *body* from the dust of the ground. Dust is a

concrete, tangible substance (ask any housekeeper!) and so man has a concrete, tangible aspect to his being. Second, God *breathed* into man's nostrils. This word can be translated "spirit." God's spirit entering the body made man alive. Third, man became a living *soul*. The combination of the body God made and the spirit He breathed resulted in a soul. In other words, the soul exists only in the context of a living body.

Body + breath = soul

The human brain is the organ responsible for our character, morals, personality, temperament and disposition. This amazing four-pound mass is comprised of a tangle of 100 billion nerve cells that would extend several thousand miles if strung together. Every thought, emotion, appetite, sensation, reflex and behavior involve messaging from one part of the brain to another. Because of advances in technology, brain imaging has been able to reveal the stunning sophistication of the grey matter that makes us who we are. In other words, the brain is an amazing *physical* organ. The soul does not live separately from it.

### **The Soul in Death**

Job asked, "But man dies and is laid away: Indeed he breathes his last. And where is he?" (Job 14:10). After lamenting the finality of death, he goes on to answer his own question, saying that man is sleeping (vs. 12). Then he says: "Appoint me a set time, and remember me!" (vs. 13). At death the content of the character is lodged in the memory of God, to be reconstructed at a "set time."

Consider this poignant story from the gospel of John: Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was sick unto death. A distance away when he heard the news, Jesus did not immediately go to his friend. After waiting two days, He said, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake Him up" (John 11:11).

His disciples objected; "Lord, if He sleeps, he will get well."

Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead" (vs. 14).

Could evidence be any clearer? From the lips of Jesus Himself we hear that death is a sleep. Obviously, this wasn't literal sleep. Lazarus was already wrapped in grave cloths, stowed away in a tomb, with no pulse or heartbeat. Yet Jesus said he was sleeping.

<b>Death is Unconsciousness</b>		
<b>Ecclesiastes 9:5-6</b>	For the living know that they will die; But the <b>dead know nothing</b> . And they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also <b>their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished</b> ; Nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.	The dead have no awareness, affection, or emotion. They no longer “have a share” in the activities “done under the sun.” In other words, they cease to interact with the living.
<b>Psalms 146:3-4</b>	Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. <b>His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that very day his plans perish.</b>	The body + breath = soul equation of Genesis two is reversed at death. The spirit, or life force, departs and the body decomposes into “elements.” Cognitive activity (plans) dies.
<b>Psalms 115:17</b>	The <b>dead do not praise the LORD</b> , nor any who go down into silence.	Contrary to the idea of the disembodied spirits of the dead populating heaven, they are “silent.”
<b>Acts 2:29 &amp; 34</b>	Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch <b>David, that he is both dead and buried</b> , and his tomb is with us to this day . . . For <b>David did not ascend into the heavens. . .</b>	David rests in the grave, and has not yet gone to heaven.

### **The Soul in the Resurrection**

God will wake us from this sleep at the last trumpet at the end of time, which precedes the resurrection. Consider these passages:

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. John 5:28-29.

Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. Revelation 20:6.

Yes, after this first resurrection, believers will “live and reign” with Jesus.

Then after the millennium comes the second resurrection. The Bible teaches that all people are raised from the dead, but in two resurrections—one for “those who have done good, to the resurrection of life,” and one for “those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:29). Simply put, all of humanity will fall into one of two groups, “the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15). It is a very solemn thought that the entire human race will be split into two distinct categories with two distinct destinies.

### **The Soul in History**

If these teachings are in the Bible, why do most Christians believe differently? Jesus said the religious leaders of His day taught, “for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9). Things are no different today. Many compromise the Word of God to accommodate widespread non-Biblical ideas. A little history will help us understand how popular errors about the state of man in death came to be.

The philosopher Plato taught dualism, or the notion that man’s nature was a mixture of human and divine. Stemming from this belief was the idea that the soul lived on after death. This is called “natural immortality.” Correcting this error, the early Christian church taught the Biblical doctrine of conditional immortality.

But when the early church wanted to increase its membership, it compromised pure doctrine.

Early in the fourth century, the Roman emperor Constantine experienced a nominal conversion to Christianity. In an effort to popularize the Christian religion, he led out in the process of amalgamating it with elements of Greek mythology and philosophy, one of which was the dualism that Plato and others had taught.

In one Greek myth, the god Zeus left his son Dionysus in the palace for the day. Some monsters called Titans tempted Dionysus outside, whereupon they devoured him. In returning to the palace, Zeus threw a lightning rod at the Titans, burning them to ashes. Out of the ashes—a mixture of divine and human—he made the human race. Thus, according to myth, the human soul retains the spark of immortality.

This belief opens the floodgates to spiritualism. Attempting to contact our dead loved ones, we will instead be introduced to demonic forces, as “Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Tracing these ideas back to the Garden of Eden, we see that we do not have life within ourselves, but rather we derive it from the tree of life. Since the moment our sin drove us from the garden, barring that tree from us, we look to a different tree—the one upon which Jesus hung on Calvary. Received gratefully, that tree gives us eternal life.

### The Takeaway

There are two views of the nature of man: natural immortality and conditional immortality. Natural immortality teaches that life comes from within ourselves; it glorifies man. Conditional immortality teaches that life comes from Jesus; it glorifies God

A choice lies before us. We can believe what is popular, culturally accepted, and familiar, or we can embrace the Bible’s teaching on the nature of man. If we embrace the truth in love, we will be taking our stand with Jesus, who alone is “the Life and the Light of men” (John 1:4).

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Notice that God did not loan, but *gave* Jesus. Notice that He gave His *only* Son. Notice that the condition of eternal life is believing this. What prevents you from saying “I believe”?

### Quiz

1. The Bible warns against witchcraft and spiritualism, calling them \_\_\_\_\_.
2. A helpful equation for understanding the soul is \_\_\_\_\_ + \_\_\_\_\_ = soul.
3. Jesus called death a \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The dead know \_\_\_\_\_.
5. With what three loud things will Jesus descend from heaven? \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
6. There are two resurrections: The resurrection of \_\_\_\_\_ and the resurrection of \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Greek dualism teaches that our nature is a mixture of human and \_\_\_\_\_.
8. What is our tree of life today? \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_

## Answer Key

1. Abominations
2. Body + breath = soul
3. Sleep
4. Nothing
5. Shout, voice, trumpet
6. Life, condemnation
7. Divine
8. The Cross

