

Do Souls Go to Heaven?

The celebrated Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: "No biblical text authorizes the statement that the soul is separated from the body at the moment of death" (Vol. 1, p. 802).

Christian Words and Christian Meanings, by John Burnaby (pp. 148, 149): "Greek philosophers had argued that the dissolution which we call death happens to nothing but bodies, and that the souls of men are by their native constitution immortal. The Greek word for immortality occurs only once in the New Testament, and there it belongs to none but the King of Kings.... The immortality of the soul is no part of the Christian creed, just as it is no part of Christian anthropology to divide soul and body and confine the real man, the essence of personality, to supposedly separable soul for which embodiment is imprisonment.... Jesus taught no doctrine of everlasting life for disembodied souls, such as no Jew loyal to the faith his fathers could have accepted or even understood. But Jewish belief was in the raising of the dead at the Last Day."

(Why then do churches constantly say that disembodied souls have gone to heaven or hell?)

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

Law and Grace, by Professor A. F. Knight (p. 79): "In the Old Testament man is never considered to be a soul dwelling in a body, a soul that will one day be set free from the oppression of the body, at the death of that body, like a bird released from a cage. The Hebrews were not dualists in their understanding of God's world."

Families at the Crossroads, by Rodney Clapp (pp. 95, 97): "Following Greek and medieval Christian thought, we often sharply separate the soul and body, and emphasize that the individual soul survives death. What's more we tend to believe the disembodied soul has escaped to heaven, to a more pleasant and fully alive existence. We mistakenly envision the Christian hope as an individual affair, a matter of separate souls taking flight to heaven. But none of this was the case for the ancient Israelites."

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

"Heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the Dying." (J.A.T. Robinson, *In the End* God, p. 104

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, Sermon on the Parable of Lazarus: "It is, indeed, very generally supposed that the souls of good men, as soon as they are discharged from the

body, go directly to heaven; but this opinion has not the least foundation in the oracles of God. On the contrary our Lord says to Mary, after the resurrection, 'Touch me not; for I have not yet ascended to my Father.'

While the Jehovah's Witnesses and others are labeled cultists because they say that the soul does not go to heaven when a person dies, the records of early church history are testimony to the fact that "orthodoxy" is the real culprit.

Did the early church teach the separation of a conscious soul from its body at the moment of death and its immediate departure to heaven? (I am not here discussing the condition of the soul as church fathers understood it, but the question of its immediate location at death.)

Here are the words of Irenaeus of the mid-second century (*Against Heresies*, Bk. 5): "Some who are reckoned among the orthodox go beyond the prearranged plan for the exaltation of the just, and are ignorant of the methods by which they are disciplined beforehand for incorruption. They thus entertain heretical opinions. For the heretics, not admitting the salvation of their flesh, affirm that immediately upon their death they shall pass above the heavens. [Note that it is the "heretics" who teach that the soul goes immediately to heaven at death. Today, according to present orthodoxy, it is the heretics who teach that souls do not go immediately to heaven or hell. This makes Irenaeus as well as John Wesley a heretic— see quotation above!] Those persons, therefore, who reject a resurrection affecting the whole man, and do their best to remove it from the Christian scheme, know nothing as to the plan of resurrection. For they do not choose to understand that, if these things are as they say, the Lord Himself, in Whom they profess to believe, did not rise again on the third day, but immediately upon his expiring departed on high, leaving His body in the earth. But the facts are that for three days, the Lord dwelt in the place where the dead were, as Jonas remained three days and three nights in the whale's belly (Matt. 12:40) . . . David says, when prophesying of Him: 'Thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell (grave).' And on rising the third day, He said to Mary, 'Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father' (John 20:17). . . . How then must not these men be put to confusion, who allege . . . that their inner man [soul], leaving the body here, ascends into the super-celestial place? [Irenaeus thus reckons today's teaching as shameful!] For as the Lord 'went away in the midst of the shadow of death' (Ps. 86: 23), where the souls of the dead were, and afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up into heaven, it is obvious that the souls of His disciples also . . . shall go away into the invisible place [Hades]. . . and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, bodily, just as the Lord rose, they shall come thus into the presence of God. As our Master did not at once take flight to heaven, but awaited the time of His resurrection . . . , so we ought also to await the time of our resurrection.

Inasmuch, therefore, as the opinions of certain orthodox persons are derived from heretical discourses, they are both ignorant of God's dispensations, of the mystery of the resurrection of the just, and of the earthly KINGDOM which is the beginning of incorruption; by means of this KINGDOM those who shall be worthy are accustomed gradually to partake of the divine nature."

[Irenaeus thus condemns the whole "orthodox" tradition about what happens at death, the tradition, that is, which eventually swamped the biblical teaching, from the third century onwards.]

The protest of Justin Martyr against what later became orthodoxy, and remains so to this day, is no less incisive (Dialogue with Trypho, Ch. 80): "They who maintain the wrong opinion say that there is no resurrection of the flesh. . . As in the case of a yoke of oxen, if one or other is loosed from the yoke, neither of them can plough alone; so neither can soul or body alone effect anything, if they be unyoked from their communion . . ." [i.e. the soul can have no separate, active existence]. For what is man but the reasonable animal composed of body and soul? Is the soul by itself man? No; but the soul of man. Would the body be called man? No; but it is called the body of man. If then neither of these is by itself man, but that which is made up of the two together is called man, and God has called man to life and resurrection, He has called not a part, but the whole, which is the soul and body. . . Well, they say, the soul is incorruptible, being a part of God and inspired by Him. . . . Then what thanks are due to Him, and what manifestation of His power and goodness is it, if He purposed to save what is by nature saved. . . . but no thanks are due to one who saves what is his own; for this is to save himself. . . . How then did Christ raise the dead? Their souls or their bodies? Manifestly both. If the resurrection were only spiritual, it was requisite that He, in raising the dead, should show the body lying apart by itself, and the soul living apart by itself. But now He did not do so, but raised the body. . . . Why do we any longer endure those unbelieving arguments and fail to see that we are retrograding when we listen to such an argument as this: That the soul is immortal, but the body mortal, and incapable of being revived. For this we used to hear from Plato, even before we learned the truth. If then the Saviour said this and proclaimed salvation to the soul alone, what new thing beyond what we heard from Plato, did He bring us?"

[Justin thus implies that teaching an immediate survival of the soul in heaven or hell is Platonism not Christianity]

Justin is here refuting the arguments of Gnosticism which denied the resurrection of the flesh. Traditional Christianity has taken a similar, but slightly different tack by including in the creed a belief in the resurrection of the body, while also teaching an immediate salvation of the soul alone in a conscious, disembodied state. This is said to be the real person, albeit disembodied. Such an idea is flatly contradicted by Justin and Irenaeus and is identified by them as pagan.

Justin Martyr: Dialogue with Trypho:

Trypho : "Do you really admit that this place Jerusalem shall be rebuilt? And do you expect your people to be gathered together, and made joyful with Christ and the Patriarchs...?"

Justin: "I and many others are of that opinion, and believe that this will take place, as you are assuredly aware; but on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong¹ to the pure and pious faith think otherwise. Moreover I pointed out to you that some who are called Christians, but are godless, impious heretics, teach doctrines that are in every way blasphemous, atheistical and foolish. . . . I choose to follow not men or men's teachings, but God and the doctrines delivered by Him. For if you have fallen with some who are called Christians, but who do not

admit the truth of the resurrection . . . who say that there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls when they die are taken to heaven, do not imagine that they are Christians . . . But I and others who are right-minded Christians on all points are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah and others declare. . . . We have perceived, moreover, that the expression, 'The Day of the Lord,' is connected with this subject. And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the Apostles of Christ, who prophesied by a revelation that was made to him that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general and the eternal resurrection of all men would take place."

Justin's statement on the Intermediate State (in full) (ca 150 AD):

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

The Latin church father Tertullian (often known as the father of Western Christianity) is another who would disagree strongly with modern "orthodoxy" about what happens to the soul at death. He protested against the idea that the soul leaves the body at death and goes to heaven:

"Plato...dispatches at once to heaven such souls as he pleases.... To the question, whither the soul is withdrawn [at death] we now give the answer.... The Stoics place only their own souls, that is, the souls of the wise, in the mansions above. Plato, it is true, does not allow this destination to all the souls, indiscriminately, of even all the philosophers, but only those who have cultivated their philosophy out of love to boys...[homosexuals].. In this system, then, the souls of the wise are carried up on high into the ether.... All other souls they thrust down to Hades.

By ourselves the lower regions of Hades are not supposed to be a bare cavity, nor some subterranean sewer of the world, but a vast deep space in the interior of the earth, and a concealed recess in its very bowels; inasmuch as we read that Christ in His death spent three days in the heart of the earth, that is, in the secret inner recess which is hidden in the earth, and enclosed by the earth, and superimposed on the abysmal depths which lie still lower down. Now although Christ is God, yet, being also man, "He died according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3) and "according to the same Scriptures was buried." With the same law of His being He fully complied, by remaining in Hades in the form and condition of a dead man; nor did He ascend into the heights of heaven before descending into the lower parts of the earth, that He might there make the patriarchs and prophets partakers of Himself. [Nothing is said in the Bible about Jesus altering the condition of the Patriarchs while he was in Hades] This being the case you must

suppose Hades to be a subterranean region and keep at arm's length those who are too proud to believe that the souls of the faithful deserve a place in the lower regions. These persons who are "servants above their Lord, and disciples above their Master," would no doubt spurn to receive the comfort of the resurrection, if they must expect it in Abraham's bosom. But it was for this purpose, say they, that Christ descended into hell, that we might not ourselves have to descend thither. Well, then [they say], what difference is there between heathens and Christians, if the same prison awaits them all when dead? [But I say], How, indeed, shall the soul mount up to heaven, where Christ is already sitting at the Father's right hand, when as yet the archangel's trumpet has not been heard by the command of God. When as yet those whom the coming of the Lord is to find on the earth, have not been caught up into the air to meet Him at His coming, in company with the dead in Christ, who shall be the first to arise? [I Thess 4:13ff.] To no one is heaven opened. When the world, indeed, shall pass away, then the kingdom of heaven shall be opened...." (Treatise on the Soul, Ch. 55):

Another "Church Father," Hippolytus (ca 170-236), certainly did not think that souls were in heaven:

"But now we must speak of Hades, in which the souls both of the righteous and the unrighteous are detained.... The righteous will obtain the incorruptible and unfading Kingdom, who indeed are at present detained in Hades, but not in the same place with the unrighteous.... Thus far, then, on the subject of Hades, in which the souls of all are detained until the time God has determined; and then He will accomplish a resurrection of all, not by transferring souls into other bodies, but by raising the bodies themselves" (Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe, 1, 2).

Modern scholars realize that the view of death which has prevailed (and is now promoted in church constantly) is not biblical. Far from it, it is, amazingly, actually "pagan" and "Gnostic." Moreover as the above quotations from the early apologists for Christianity show, the idea of going to heaven or hellfire immediately at death was a novel, heretical doctrine not taught by the church for some three hundred years after Christ. In a standard text of Christian Dogmatics we read:

"...the hellenization process by which Christianity adopted many Greek [pagan] thought patterns led in a different direction as the eschatological hope came to be expressed in Hellenistic categories. Irenaeus said: 'It is manifest that the souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall go away in the invisible place allotted to them by God. and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come into the presence of God.' Irenaeus' statement contains the concept of an abode or purgatory in which the soul of the dead remains until the universal resurrection. We should not denounce this as a deviation from biblical teaching, since the point of the assertion is antignostic. Irenaeus wanted to reject the Gnostic idea that at the end of this earthly life the soul immediately ascends to its heavenly abode. As the early fathers fought the pagan idea that a part of the human person is simply immortal, it was important for them to assert that there is no rectilinear ascent to God. Once we die, life is over" (CHRISTIAN DOGMATICS, BRAATEN/JENSON, VOL. 2, p. 503, section written by Hans Schwartz, Professor of Protestant Theology, University of Regensburg, Federal Republic of Germany)

There is a further impressive protest against the popular idea that the dead survive as conscious "souls" in heaven. One might expect that such protest would initiate a wide-scale reform amongst the clergy. Alan Richardson writes in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (pp. 111, 112, emphasis added):

"The Bible writers, holding fast to the conviction that the created order owes its existence to the wisdom and love of God and is therefore essentially good, could not conceive of life after death as a disembodied existence [as millions of sincere believers are now taught in church to think of it!] ("we shall not be found naked" — II Cor. 5:3), but as a renewal under conditions of the intimate unity of body and soul which was human life as they knew it. Hence death was thought of as the death of the whole man, and such phrases as 'freedom from death,' imperishability or immortality could only properly be used to describe what is meant by the phrase eternal or living God 'who only has immortality' (I Tim. 6:16). Man does not possess within himself the quality of deathlessness, but must, if he is to overcome the destructive power of death, receive it as the gift of God who 'raised Christ from the dead,' and put death aside like a covering garment (I Cor. 15:53, 54). It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that this possibility for man ((2 Tim. 1:10) has been brought to life and the hope confirmed that the corruption (Rom. 11:7) which is a universal feature of human life shall be effectively overcome."

The fundamental confusion about life after death which has so permeated traditional Christianity is brilliantly described by Dr. Paul Althaus in his book, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress Press, 1966, pp. 413, 414):

"The hope of the early church centered on the resurrection of the Last Day. It is this which first calls the dead into eternal life (I Cor. 15; Phil 3:21). This resurrection happens to the man and not only to the body. Paul speaks of the resurrection not 'of the body' but 'of the dead.' This understanding of the resurrection implicitly understands death as also affecting the whole man.... Thus [in traditional orthodoxy] the original Biblical concepts have been replaced by ideas from Hellenistic, Gnostic dualism. The New Testament idea of the resurrection which affects the whole man has had to give way to the immortality of the soul. The Last Day also loses its significance, for souls have received all that is decisively important long before this. Eschatological tension is no longer strongly directed to the day of Jesus' Coming. The difference between this and the Hope of the New Testament is very great."

That difference may be witnessed in contemporary preaching at funerals which, though claiming the Bible as its source, reflects a pagan Platonism which both the New Testament, the early Church Fathers and modern informed scholars reject.

Can belief in pagan ideas, promoted in the name of Jesus, result in a knowledge of Truth which leads to salvation? Is not this obvious paganism of Christianity a cause for alarm and a reason for returning to the Truth of the Bible?

1 A number of commentators believe that the text has been corrupted here and that Justin wrote "who do *not* belong...." The alteration was made to make Justin less condemning of amillennialism. [Return to text.](#)

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