

GREAT QUESTIONS

IS MAN IMMORTAL?

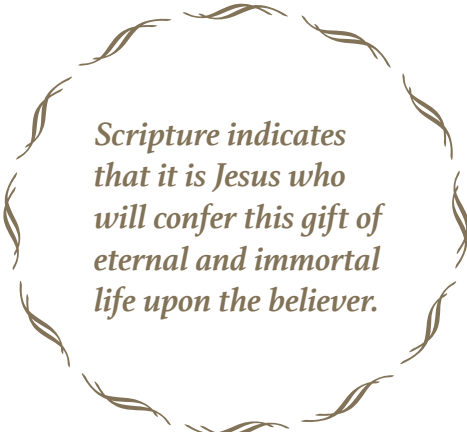
*A Scriptural Case
for Conditional
Immortality*

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The quest for immortality is as old as the human race.

While many have sought freedom from physical death, most people realize that all people die, eventually. Yet there is still a near universal belief in life after death of some kind. Does some part of human beings live forever? Most people think so, even if it's just the immaterial part, whether it's called the soul or the spirit. To be human is to be immortal by our very nature, but is this what the Bible teaches?

This brief work seeks to present the case that human beings are not naturally immortal, but that immortality is a gift that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. The starting point for this discussion will not be man, however. Rather our starting point will be God, because understanding the nature of God is essential to understanding the nature of man. And developing a biblical understanding of these natures can help know the reason Jesus willingly entered into our humanity, made atonement for sin, was raised to life, sits at the Father's right hand and the reason he is coming again.



*Scripture indicates
that it is Jesus who
will confer this gift of
eternal and immortal
life upon the believer.*

GOD IS CREATOR

The very beginning of the Bible reveals that God created everything out of nothing (Genesis 1:1-3). He spoke and everything leaped into existence. This was the beginning of everything. Get this point wrong, and everything that follows will be wrong too. His creation testifies to God's glory and power (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20).

The same Scriptures that declare God is Creator also reveal that all things depend upon him for sustenance as well as existence. Job captures this thought in Job 12:10 and 34:14-15, "In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind . . . If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all humanity would perish together and mankind would return to the dust."

Humanity was God's very special creation, unlike any other creature:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them
(Genesis 1:26-27).

Unlike the other aspects of the creation, humanity alone bears God's image. Yet, does this image mean man is like God in every way?

HUMANS ARE A UNITY OF BODY AND SPIRIT

Before answering that question, it is helpful to consider how Scripture describes a human being. Genesis 2:7 explains, “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” When the body and the spirit are joined, the Bible reveals that a person becomes a living being (King James, “living soul”). Therefore, a human being consists of a material body and an immaterial spirit joined together into a unitary and inseparable whole.

Also notice that Genesis does not state that there is any other aspect to a human being, such as an immortal soul. Instead, all through the Bible humanity is reminded of its composition of dust (Genesis 3:19, 23). This idea is echoed by the psalmist in such passages as Psalm 103:13-14, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.” Addressing the spirit within a human, Elihu in the Book of Job states, “But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding . . . The Spirit of God has made me, the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 32:8; 33:4). Therefore, even though man is made in the image of God, as a created being, he is still distinct in composition.

GOD ALONE IS IMMORTAL

The attributes of God can be divided into two types —

communicable and incommunicable. Communicable attributes of God are those that humans can also possess, although only to a limited extent. Examples of this are love, grace, mercy, goodness, truthfulness, rational thought and relationality.

Incommunicable attributes of God are those attributes exclusive to him. Humans cannot share the incommunicable attributes of divinity. Some incommunicable attributes of God are his omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, sovereignty, immutability and self-existence. But what of God's immortality? Is that a communicable or incommunicable attribute?

Scripture is clear that God alone is immortal, "... God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen" (1 Timothy 6:15b-16, see also Romans 1:23, 1 Timothy 1:17). Scripturally, immortality seems to be an incommunicable attribute of God as immortality is ascribed to God and God alone. God has always been, he is, and always will be. He dwells outside of time and creation — he alone is eternal and immortal.

MAN IS MORTAL

Unlike God, humanity has a beginning (creation in Adam's and Eve's case, and conception for every other human being that has lived) and an end (death).

As noted earlier, God formed Adam's body out of the dust. Adam was absolutely perfect, yet he was not alive until

God breathed into him the breath of life. Once God gave Adam the breath of life, it was then the man, Adam became alive. It was then Adam's brain began to function, and it was then Adam began his relationship with almighty God. There is no indication that God ever planned for Adam to die, but there is also no mention that Adam possessed within himself the ability to live forever. If that were the case, Genesis as well as all of Scripture, is strangely silent. Instead, overwhelmingly, the Scriptures repeatedly refer to human beings as capable of dying, and after the fall, the death sentence was pronounced upon Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:17; 3:19).

Because a human being can die (Romans 6:23; Hebrews 9:27), the nature of a man or woman is mortal and finite. Even though humans bear God's image, this does not include immortality. God pointedly states that man is mortal in Genesis 6:3, "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal.'" It should not be forgotten that God drove Adam and Eve out of Eden, prevented them from continuing to take fruit from the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:22). Evidently, the fruit from the Tree of Life sustained Adam and Eve in such a way that age did not negatively affect Adam and Eve bodily. Seemingly, if humanity continued to eat from that tree, they would live forever in a sinful state — this was undesirable for God as he certainly did not want a humanity that lived forever in sin, disobedience and rebellion against him.

Death is an undesirable state for the human being — so much so, the psalmist complains to God, "What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness" (Psalm 30:9)? Death came because of sin and is the punishment for sin (Romans

5:12; 6:23).

Therefore, since unlike God, man dies, one can safely conclude from the Scriptures that man ceases to live at death. Nothing about the human being survives death as the body returns to the dust, and the breath of life returns to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7).

SIN BROUGHT DEATH

Eve, through deception, and then Adam by deliberate action, disobeyed God and ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus bringing sin into God's paradise. As a result, they also brought death.

It should be noted that sin initially originated in Satan when he chose to challenge God's exclusive right to rule as well as God's righteousness and holiness (see Luke 10:18; Genesis 3:4-5), and Satan passed this disobedience along to other holy angels, who also chose to go along with Satan's rebellion (2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6). Eventually sin came to the human race (Genesis 3) through deception and an outright lie, "you will not certainly die."

Unlike the sin of angels, which will result in their destruction and death at the end of time (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 20), the death sentence passed immediately upon Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), with residual effects upon Earth and the life it sustains (Romans 8:18-27). God immediately removed humanity from the Garden of Eden, where they could partake of the Tree of Life and live forever (Genesis 3:21-24), and numbered mankind's days (Genesis 6:3). What horror must have engulfed the minds and hearts of Adam and Eve when they saw the life taken from the

animals, whose skins now clothed them! What must have been worse was that God no longer walked in fellowship with them in the Garden. God's image bearers were now cut off from him.

DEAD MEANS DEAD

When a human being dies, he is truly dead. Scripture reveals that the unity of material body and immaterial spirit is severed, and that person ceases to live. Scripture further states that if it were not for the hope of resurrection, that would be the complete end of the person. Notice the words of Ecclesiastes 12:6-7, "Remember him — before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." Also, the words of the psalmist in Psalm 146:3-4, "Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing." As well as Ecclesiastes 9:5, "For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten."

Scripture indicates that dead really means dead — the lack of existence. Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, said that the dead know nothing and the psalmist echoes that the plans the dead had "come to nothing" as they return to the earth elements from which they were created. David, a man who greatly desired God's will, lamented the silence and inactivity of the grave when he said, "Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the

grave?” (Psalm 6:5).

If humanity were not really dead, then Jesus had several opportunities to give deeper insight into just what death meant, especially when confronting the death of Jairus’ daughter and his friend, Lazaraus (Luke 8:40-56; John 11:1-43). In both cases, Jesus acknowledged the girl and man were dead. The people knew this too, or else they would not be in a state of mourning and asking Jesus to intervene in both fatal situations.

When Jesus and Stephen both died, they gave up their spirits and prayed for God to receive their spirits (Matthew 27:50; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59). Undoubtedly, both Jesus and Stephen knew, and were convinced, that as God received their breath, he could and would give it back to them so that they would live again. This idea was not foreign to the Hebrew mindset, and was the promise of God, for the great prophet Ezekiel saw this in his vision of the dry bones coming to life (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

GOD’S PLAN FOR RESCUE

Humanity’s fall into sin and death did not catch our Heavenly Father by surprise because there is nothing he doesn’t know and nowhere that he is not present (past, present and future). Truly, nothing is hidden, nor can be hidden from God (Hebrews 4:13). Unlike his plan for rebellious angels, God mercifully planned the rescue of his image bearers, restoring their lives from the death state and fellowship with him. This is the promise of God in both the Old and New Testaments.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God declared,

On this mountain he [the LORD Almighty] will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

Through John in Revelation 21:3,

“Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Man’s salvation from sin and death would nevertheless come at a great cost. Satan would attack the Agent through whom the life, perfection and fellowship would come — God’s only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Though Jesus ultimately will have the final victory, he would suffer greatly at the hands of Satan. God the Father said, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15, see also Philippians 1:6-11). Ultimately God knew that he would have to come to save his image bearers from sin and death and to give them life and perfection — for only he alone can do the work.

When, the time was right, God took on flesh in Abraham's descendant Jesus (John 1:1-14; Galatians 4:4). Conceived by the Holy Spirit of God, Jesus was holy, righteous and perfect. This was God's new Adam, who would walk before him in righteousness and holiness, and become the substitutionary sacrifice that would atone for human sin (1 Corinthians 15:45). When Jesus' lifeblood was poured out through his wounds, and his breath returned to the Father from the cross, atonement for and the defeat of sin was accomplished (John 19:30). Three days and nights later when the Spirit raised Jesus from the grave, Jesus as the new Adam, was given the remedy for death: incorruption and immortality (1 Corinthians 15:20).

HUMAN IMMORTALITY IS CONTINGENT UPON FAITH IN JESUS

As mentioned earlier, God gave Adam and Eve choice, that choice plays into whether or not to receive God's forgiveness through believing in Jesus Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin (John 3:16; 5:12-13; 10:10; Romans 6:23).

This choice has eternal consequences — either one will choose forgiveness through the work of Jesus on the cross, or eternal death, resulting from the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10, 14-15; 21:8). Jesus said it best in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Paul echoes this in Romans 2:7, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life." The apostle Paul also declared, "But it has now been revealed through the

appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

When one comes to saving faith by truly placing trust in Jesus’ atoning death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, that person’s sin becomes forgiven and that person is cleansed from all unrighteousness (Matthew 26:28; Acts 13:38-39; 1 John 1:9). From the moment of faith in Jesus’ completed work, the Holy Spirit is given to the believer as a deposit and guarantee of the eternal and immortal life that is to come (Ephesians 1:14; 2 Timothy 1:1; James 1:12). Scripture indicates that it is Jesus that will confer this gift of eternal and immortal life upon the believer. “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Adam sinned; he brought death into the world. Jesus never sinned and destroyed death with his perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross.

God the Father raised Jesus bodily from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was resurrected, he became the first one to come back from the dead to never die again. As a result, he holds the keys to the grave and death itself. As Jesus said, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

When Jesus ascended to the Father’s throne, he ascended bodily — incorruptible and immortal. He currently sits as an incorruptible and immortal man at the Father’s right hand as our high priest (Acts 1:9-11; 7:55-56; Hebrews 4:14-16).

ETERNAL LIFE IS GIVEN AT THE RESURRECTION

When will immortality be given to a human being? Scripture reveals that it will be at the second coming of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15, especially 15:50-57), that he bestows incorruption and immortality upon any image bearer trusting in his atoning work for life eternal when he comes again at the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:21-26, see also 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

No wonder Jesus said in John 3:17-18, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” Just as Moses urged the children of Israel to choose life after being given the Law that pointed to the holiness of God and our rescue through Messiah (see Deuteronomy 30:19-20), we are to urge all to believe in Jesus today (2 Corinthians 5:16-21)!

The pursuit of resurrection and immortality was so strong to Paul he wrote in Philippians 3:10-12, “I want to know Christ — yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, become like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Jesus took hold of me.” Second Timothy 4:7-8 states, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous

Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” This is Paul’s whole argument in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. For the apostle Paul, his hope was in resurrection. Therefore, one can safely conclude that there is no existence, or ethereal experience, in death. There is no continual or better existence immediately after death. If so, why would Paul desire to know Jesus and the resurrection? Resurrection is clearly the way to eternal and immortal life.

ETERNAL LIFE IS AN EMBODIED EXISTENCE

We cannot be present with the Lord until Jesus confers upon us his gift of immortality, which comes complete with an incorruptible body (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). Concerning members of the “Faith Hall of Fame,” the writer of Hebrews concluded, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-40).

As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus is the first fruits of resurrection, meaning he was the first to rise to an embodied eternal life. As noted above, our resurrection happens at the second coming of Jesus. John emphasized in his first letter, “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2b). Paul echoes this thought in Philippians 3:20-21, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables

him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” This was Paul’s desire — to undergo this transformation for it would be then that he would be with Jesus.

THE WICKED WILL PERISH

As has been repeatedly shown from the Scriptures, immortality and incorruption come only through Jesus. This is God’s rescue plan, this is salvation’s meaning, and this is the gospel, the blessed hope of humanity (see 1 Corinthians 15). This is what the apostles believed, and this is the testimony of the church. As has been previously shown from the Scriptures, only believers will receive immortality, which will be conferred upon them at the resurrection. Seemingly, this will be when access to the Tree of Life is restored to humanity (Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19).

One final question that should be asked at this point is, “What will become of the wicked, who refuse to repent and believe in Jesus’ atoning work on the cross?” Again, the Scriptures have the answer. As noted earlier, the Bible reveals that the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death — a destruction and absence of life that is so final and complete that it will be as if the wicked had never lived (Revelation 20:14, Obadiah 16).

Jesus warned of this destruction in Matthew 10:28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Soul here means life, not an immortal part of man that is incapable of dying. This separation of the unity

of material body and immaterial breath of life/soul, for the wicked is final. There will never be another opportunity for them to live again. God mercifully ends the lives of those who, through unbelief, persisted in sin, rebellion and wickedness. Destruction is the eternal punishment for the unbeliever (Matthew 7:13; 25:31-46; Romans 9:22; Galatians 6:8).

God has worked salvation so that no one has to perish but can have eternal life — and it is God's desire that all would come to saving faith (2 Peter 3:9). However, God will not violate the free will of any human being. He leaves salvation to the decisive will of every man and woman. Therefore, may we look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith — the great life giver!

HOW ABOUT YOU?

Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Promised One, the Messiah? Do you believe that Jesus' death and resurrection atoned for human sin — defeating both sin and death? If so, why not turn to him in saving faith by asking him to forgive your sins and to come into your life right now? If you will trust in Jesus' completed work for salvation, he will fill you with the promised Holy Spirit, the deposit and guarantee of the incorruptible and immortal life that is to come. Why not trust in Jesus' work alone for salvation today?

