

issue 51  
DEC  
2011

# from death to life

in 5.24



life • death • resurrection • eternal destinies • bible teaching

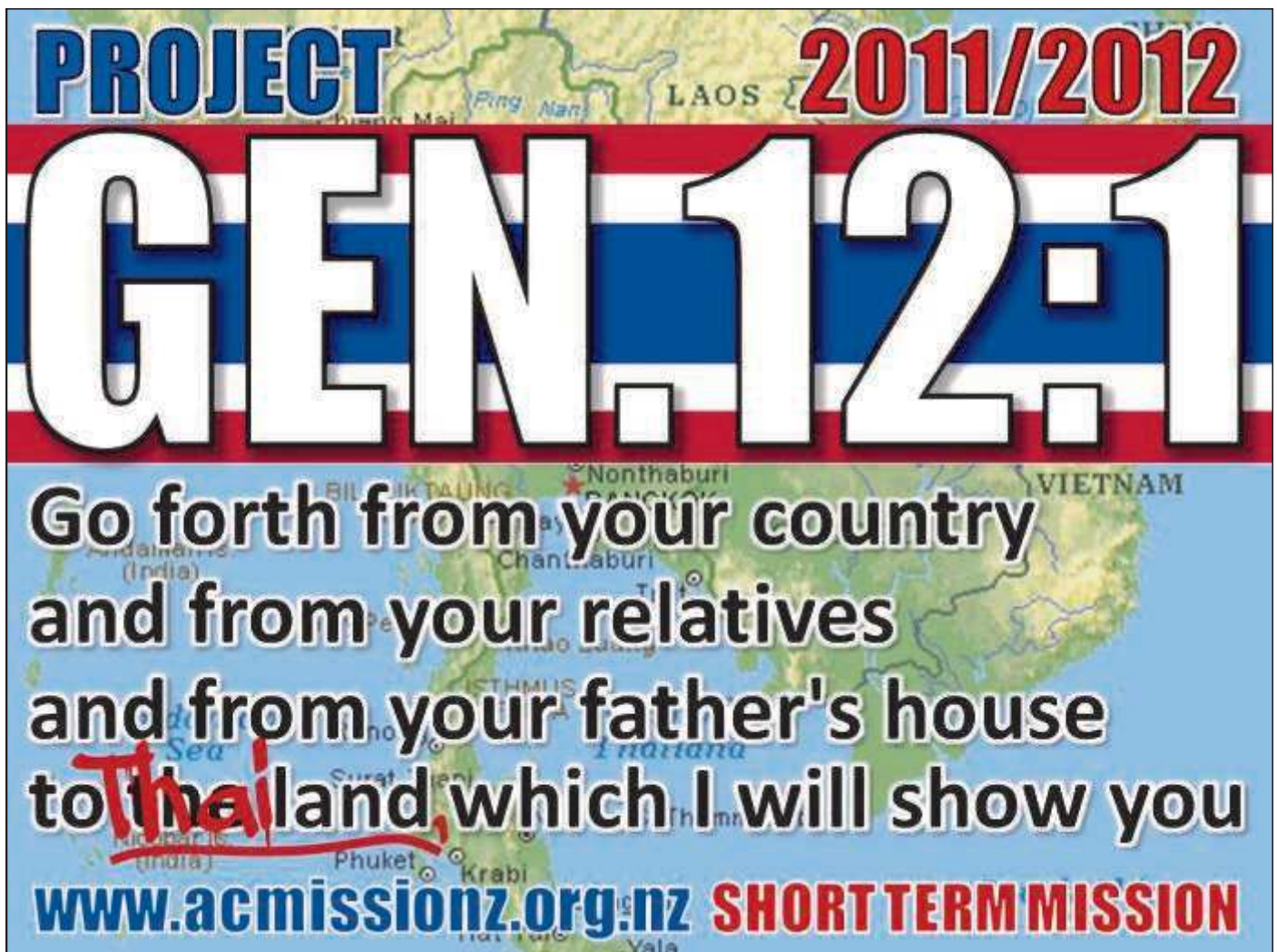
## In This Issue:

Welcome to Issue 51.

Happy Christmas! This time of year is a reminder to me of the hope we have because of Jesus Christ.

"To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the Hope of Glory."  
(Colossians 1:27).

Tarnya Burge *co-editor*



**PROJECT** 2011/2012

# GEN. 12:1

Go forth from your country  
and from your relatives  
and from your father's house  
to ~~Thailand~~ land, which I will show you

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## Production

**From Death to Life** is a quarterly publication produced by:  
**Resurrection Publishing** for The **Conditional Immortality Association of New Zealand**.

Editors: Jeff Vann & Tarnya Burge

Design & Layout: Tarnya Burge & Garry Schäche

Print & Distribution: Tarnya Burge

## Subscription

Print subscriptions may be sent in the amount of NZ\$15 for four issues to:

**Resurrection Publishing**

**PO Box 202-162**

**Southgate**

**Takanini 2246**

**New Zealand**

Alternatively subscriptions and donations can be made via our website.

A printable electronic version is available **free online** at our website:



# "Unto You is born this day..."

by Jefferson Vann

In the famous proclamation of Luke 2:11, each of the titles that the angel gives Jesus tells something about who he is and what he came to do. Rather than simply identifying him as one among many, the titles identify Jesus as unique, and uniquely significant.

**1. The angel called Jesus Lord because he was God in the flesh, master of all.**

The Greek term kurios was used in the secular context of any person who had authority over another. It was also used of a person who owned something. A slave's master was his kurios. A home's owner was its kurios. In the political world, kings were called kurios (Acts 25:26), as was Caesar. But in the religious realm

of Judaism, the term kurios was reserved for the highest deity. It was the term in Greek that the scribes used to translate the Hebrew word YHVH, the name of God. In the New Testament, many of the texts which referred to God as LORD were quoted in reference to Jesus. For example, Paul tells the Romans that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."<sup>1</sup> He quotes Joel 2:32, and applies it to Jesus. Christmas is a time when we celebrate God coming to earth in the form of his Son.

**2. The angel called Jesus Saviour because he came to rescue the lost.**

The Bible is a story of rescue, from beginning to end. All of its minor stories of rescue point to one major story of rescue, which we read about in the Gospels. The angel calls Jesus a Saviour, a Rescuer. The Jews in Jesus' day were looking for a Saviour to rescue them from Roman occupa-





tion. But Jesus came to rescue them from their sins, and bring them back into a right relationship with God. Christmas is a time to celebrate God's intervention in our lives, because we need him.

**3. The angel called Jesus Christ (Anointed) because he was set apart by the Holy Spirit, chosen by the Father for the work of deliverance and the authority of leadership.**

In biblical times, people were anointed to set them apart for ministry. The act of smearing someone with cleansing oil signified authority and ability to do a special task, whether that task was proclamation (prophet) intercession (priest) or dominion (king). Christ was to do all three. He is the ultimate anointed One who was prefigured by all the

others. In Peter's words, he is "the Christ, the Son of the living God."<sup>2</sup>

May we use this Christmas season to announce to the world that Christ -- its Saviour and Lord - has come.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>*Romans 10:13 ESV.*

<sup>2</sup>*Matthew 16:16 ESV.*



# God is Different

by Jefferson Vann

1 Timothy 6:16 is one of the foundational verses for conditionalists. In it, we see a theological principle that we are not ready to relinquish in favour of popular teachings. It is the principle that God is the only being in the universe who has immortality. His immortality is exclusive. In that respect, he is different from all other beings.

“The only One who has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light; no one has seen or can see Him, to Him be honour and eternal might. Amen” (HCSB).

The verse is the second part of a doxology: a pause to praise the God of whom the author is writing. In its context, Paul is encouraging Timothy to keep pursuing eternal life to which he was called, but has not yet attained. It is a promise from the only one capable of making that promise: God, who alone possesses that thing that Paul urges Timothy to pursue.

Comparing 1 Timothy 1:17 to 6:15-16 has led some scholars to suggest that Paul did not originate this

text. He may have been quoting an already existing liturgy. That would explain how Paul quotes the text as if it is already known by Timothy and his companions at Ephesus. The principles found in those texts would have already been accepted as part of the Christian message.

## Paul asserts four things about God here:

1. God's Power is Eternal. The phrase *kratos aionion* (just before the “Amen”) asserts that God's battery never runs out. He never needs to be recharged. What a contrast this is to what Paul says about himself. He tells Timothy that when he was facing his lion's den “the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it.”<sup>1</sup> But Paul said that now that his work was done, he was about to die. His battery was running



out. "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up 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 loved his appearing."<sup>2</sup> He speaks of an ending of his life, and a new beginning, at the resurrection when Christ appears. These are not the words of someone convinced that he has eternal life already. They are the words of one who realizes that God alone possesses unending power and life.

2. God's Authority is Eternal. He is to be honored for eternity. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (6:15). That suggests, that everyone who has authority now derives that authority from him. It also suggests that the same is true of anyone who will ever be in authority. All honor will go to

him. But all honor does not *presently* go to him. Perhaps that is why the adjective *aionios* (eternal) does not apply to the noun *time'* (honor) in this verse. But someday, God's chosen king will return. Then the kingdoms of this world will "become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). So, from the standpoint of eternity, his authority is the only one that will last forever.

3. God is different from the other "gods." The "gods" of the first century Roman empire are idols made of stone or wood or metal. Those idols sometimes represent spirit beings, but have limitations that the God of the Bible does not have. They can be seen. God



cannot. They can be approached by anyone with the ability to fashion them, or the means to procure them. The God whom Paul praises in this doxology does not dwell inside an image. His dwelling is in unapproachable light (*fos aprositon*). God is not a good luck charm to be manipulated by humans for their own desires and prosperity. He is distant. Paul is not saying that God never approaches us. The gospel tells us that God came near in the person of Jesus Christ, and chose to make his dwelling among us (John 1:14). The Holy Spirit dwells inside believers, who are his temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). The author of Hebrews tells us that by prayer we can “with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). So, what Paul affirms in 1 Timothy 6:16 applies to God’s nature. There is a fundamental difference between the Christian God and the pagan Gods. The pagan gods are things to be manipulated. They can be used to bring a person

good luck or prevent bad luck. But the God of the Bible will not be put to the test. His power can never be used for anything other than accomplishing his will at his prompting.

4. God’s Life is Immortal. In the Bible, this word *athanasia* is never used as an attribute of anyone else but God this side of the resurrection at Christ’s second coming. It is never used to describe a human soul or spirit. Yet it has come to be popular and “orthodox” to make all kinds of concessions to God’s exclusive immortality. Matthew Henry, for example, says that God “only is immortal in himself, and has immortality as he is the fountain of it, for the immortality of angels and spirits derived from him.”<sup>3</sup> So the hypothetical “box” in which we might put all immortal beings is actually not exclusive at all. It contains not only God, but all of those sentient creatures created by him, both human and angelic. Perhaps we should be grateful that cats and dogs did not make the grade.



Lately evangelical scholars see the dilemma in accepting what Paul said about God in 1 Tim. 6:16. Their conclusions, however, are ultimately the same as Matthew Henry's. Peterson, for example, states the "orthodox" position quite well in his recent debate with Fudge. He said that "Plato held to the soul's natural or inherent immortality. By contrast, evangelical Christians hold that God alone is inherently immortal (1 Tim. 6:16) and that he confers immortality to all human beings."<sup>4</sup> But once the "and that he confers" is added to the equation, the dilemma begins. 1 Tim. 6:16 says nothing about God conferring his exclusive attribute to all human beings. Either that attribute is exclusive or it is not. Conditionalists see no clear contrast between the view of Plato and that of our brother evangelicals who hold Peter-

son's view.

The onus is ours, however, as conditionalists, to back up this bold claim that God's immortality is exclusive. Ours is the minority position. That is why a study of the terms used in the Bible to imply immortality is helpful. The study shows that the concept of immortality does not apply to angels and human beings by default. This adds justification for our being obstinate enough to hold to the exclusive immortality of God in spite of its being an unpopular doctrine.

The noun *athanasia* only appears three times in the canonical Bible. It makes no appearance in the entire Old Testament. Besides 1 Tim. 6:16, it only appears in 1 Corinthians 15:53-54.

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

The ESV translators, normally sticklers to word-for-word accuracy, betray their theological bias here by



supplying the word *body* twice in verse 53, even though there is no Greek equivalent in the original. Paul actually agrees with what he stated in 1 Tim. 6:16. Since God alone is immortal, something will have to change in order for human beings, who are perishable and mortal, to become immortal. That change will take place at the resurrection. There is no indication in the text itself that human mortality pertains only to our bodies. That is a concept that is assumed by the proponents of natural or inherent immortality, and denied by conditionalists, who propose that immortality is only potential. 1 Cor. 15 and 1 Tim. 6:16 both serve as evidence for the potential immortality position. While 1 Cor. 15 shows that immortality (*athanasia*) is not currently a present possession (even for the saved), 1 Tim. 6:16 identifies the one being who is the exception to that rule, and presently has *athanasia*.

The Apocrypha provides seven more instances of the term. While we cannot rely on the Apocrypha as a standard for proof of a doctrine, we can consult it in order to establish how certain terms were

used, which is a reflection of their understood meaning. Were we, for example, to find numerous references to *athanasia* as a natural human attribute it might show that intertestamental Jews viewed humans as naturally immortal beings.

4 Maccabees 8-18 contains an account describing the torture of seven young men and their mother by the Tyrant (Antiochus IV). Instances of the term *athanasia* occur in two places. In 4 Maccabees 14:4-5 the writer says that “none of the seven youths proved coward or shrank from death, but all of them, as though running the course toward immortality, hastened to death by torture” (RSV). From this we can infer that intertestamental Jews did have the concept of immortality, but saw it as something to be earned through diligent faithfulness to God. It was certainly not an attribute taken for granted as the natural possession of all human beings.

The second occurrence of *athanasia* refers to the mother, who, “as though having a mind like adamant and giving rebirth for immortality to the whole number of her sons, she implored them and urged them on to death for the

sake of religion” (4 Maccabees 16:13).

The mother is pictured as encouraging her sons to stay true to their faith in God with such zeal that it is like she was giving birth to them all over again, this time for immortality instead of mortality (as it was in the first instance of her giving birth to them). Again, there is no innate, inherent immortality described here. Immortality is something to be gained by a martyr’s death for the seven sons. Their mother, who gave them natural birth, did not in so doing impart to them immortality.

All the other instances of the term *athanasia* occur in The Wisdom of Solomon. Notice this revealing statement about the destiny of the righteous:

Wisdom 3:1-4 RSV

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality.

As in 4 Maccabees, *athanasia* is seen as potential for humans, because the righteous will be resurrected, but *athanasia* is not an inher-

ent attribute.

Wisdom 4:1-7 RSV

... in the memory of virtue is immortality, because it is known both by God and by men. When it is present, men imitate it, and they long for it when it has gone; and throughout all time it marches crowned in triumph, victor in the contest for prizes that are undefiled. But the prolific brood of the ungodly will be of no use, and none of their illegitimate seedlings will strike a deep root or take a firm hold. For even if they put forth boughs for a while, standing insecurely they will be shaken by the wind, and by the violence of the winds they will be uprooted. The





branches will be broken off before they come to maturity, and their fruit will be useless, not ripe enough to eat, and good for nothing. For children born of unlawful unions are witnesses of evil against their parents when God examines them. But the righteous man, though he die early, will be at rest.

Here is no denial of the reality of death, but a glimpse beyond it, to a resurrected virtuous person, known both by God and by men. The ungodly, though they might produce a prolific brood, will be uprooted. Notice, again, that there is no mention of *athanasia* as a common trait held by all humans. A resurrection unto immortality is only the hope of the righteous.

#### Wisdom 8:13-17 RSV

Because of {wisdom} I shall have immortality, and leave an everlasting remembrance to those who come after me. I shall govern peoples, and nations will be subject to me; dread monarchs will be afraid of me when they hear of me; among the people I shall show myself capable, and courageous in war. When I enter my house, I shall find rest with her, for companionship with her has no bitterness, and life with her has no pain, but gladness and joy. When I considered these things inwardly, and thought upon them in my mind, that in kinship with wisdom there is immortality...

Wisdom, as defined by the wisdom literature of the Bible and related works like *The Wisdom of Solomon* is the ability to make correct moral choices which lead to God's favour. In the Bible, those correct moral choices usually led to a long healthy life, but by the time *The Wisdom of Solomon* was written, one's eternal destiny was also seen as a consequence of living wisely. It is the route to eventual *athanasia*. It is a narrow path that does not include everyone on the planet. It is not innate, nor is the immortality it produces.

#### Wisdom 15:1-3 RSV

But thou, our God, art kind and true, patient, and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are thine, knowing thy power; but we will not sin, because we know that we are accounted thine. For to know thee is complete righteousness, and to know thy power is the root of immortality.



In the New Testament we found that *athanasia* was an exclusive attribute of God, but a hope for humanity. In this final reference to *athanasia* in the Apocrypha, we see a relationship with God as the only means of obtaining to that hope.

### ***Athantos***

In the Apocrypha, there are a few instances of the corresponding adjective that we would translate immortal as well. Although this word does not appear in the New Testament, it is helpful to see how it was used.

It is said of Eleazar that “in no way did he turn the rudder of religion until he sailed into the haven of immortal victory” (4 Maccabees 7:3). The most that can be inferred from this metaphorical statement is that Eleazar is counted among those who finished the course of faith, and awaits a resurrection unto immortality. It does not imply that Eleazar was already immortal by nature. It is said of the aforementioned seven young men that “just as the hands and feet are moved in harmony with the guidance of

the mind, so those holy youths, as though moved by an immortal spirit of devotion, agreed to go to death for its sake” (4 Maccabees 14:6). All this implies about these youths is that although their devotion was undying, they were not. You cannot prove that people are immortal from a passage that records their deaths.

Later, the author of 4 Maccabees does state that these “sons of Abraham with their victorious mother are gathered together into the chorus of the fathers, and have received pure and immortal souls from God” (4 Maccabees 18:23). There is a hint of some kind of rewarded state here, but perhaps the reward is merely the certainty of a resurrection unto immortality. At any rate, 1 Corinthians 15 states that the resurrection is when the reward will be realized. If some intertestamental Jews imagined a conscious intermediate state, they were mistaken.

One use of *athanatos* is found which draws a distinction between God’s righteousness (which is said to be immortal) and secular man’s covenant with death.

Wisdom 1:12-16 (RSV)

Do not invite death by the error of your life, nor bring on destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they might exist, and the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them; and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. But ungodly men by their words and deeds summoned death; considering him a friend, they pined away, and they made a covenant with him, because they are fit to belong to his party.

Here again, there is no mention of a man, or even a part of man, which is immortal by nature. In fact, immortality belongs to the righteous One. Human beings are mortal.

*Athanatos* is also found in The Wisdom of Sirach:

For we cannot have everything, human beings are not immortal. What is brighter than the sun? And yet it fades. Flesh and blood think of nothing but evil. He surveys the armies of the lofty sky, and all of us are only dust and ashes (Sirach 17:30-32 New Jerusalem Bible).

Here is perhaps the clearest expression of human mortality in the Apocrypha. It says that men do not have

the attribute that Paul said only God has. He will always last, but we are “dust and ashes.” The statement is in perfect agreement with the New Testament.

### ***Afthartos***

Another adjective – sometimes translated “immortal” in versions of the New Testament – emphasizes the unfailing, imperishable, or incorruptible nature of the noun it modifies. If this adjective were found applied to beings other than God, it would serve as evidence that the NT authors assumed that these beings possessed immortality. In Romans 1:23 Paul explained that idolatrous humanity “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Notice that only God is placed in the “beings having immortality” box. Man and animals are comfortably placed in the “all others” box.

In 1 Tim. 1:17 Paul ascribes “honour and glory for ever and ever” “unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God.” If the term immortal ap-



plies to all other created beings (or at least the higher ones: angels and humans) one wonders why Paul would bother mentioning the attribute. But if the attribute is exclusive to God alone (as Paul later states in chapter 6), his mentioning it here makes perfect sense.

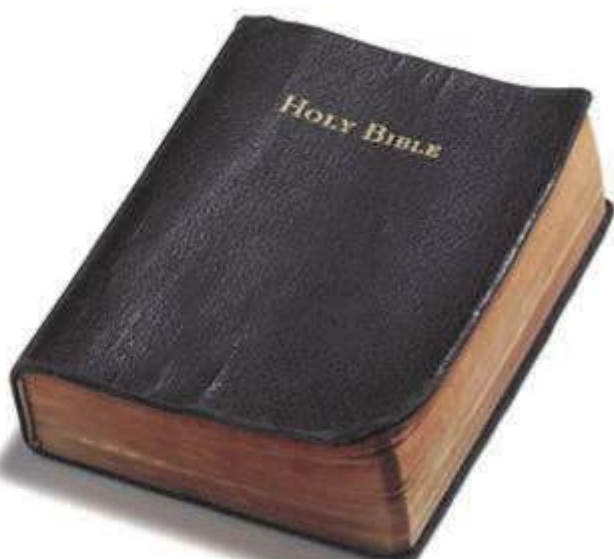
Some might argue that the term “immortal” is appropriate to describe men’s spirits or souls, but not their bodies. As such it might be appropriate to speak of God being immortal in an absolute sense. He has no body to corrupt or perish. This logic only applies if the principles of Platonic anthropology are true. Plato argued that the soul of man is immortal because it is simple, and cannot be divided into composite parts. The notion of human immortality is the result of

combining this principle from pagan philosophy with biblical theology. One question conditionalists ask is “can the Bible be left alone to answer the question of human mortality, or must we borrow from pagan theology to do it?”

All other references to *afthartos* in the New Testament<sup>5</sup> use the term to describe the hope of believers after the resurrection, or some kind of character trait that is imperishable in the sense that it does not fade away with time. There is not one single use of the term applied to human nature itself, body or soul. If this attribute is such an essential part of human identity, one would expect this adjective to be used repeatedly throughout the New Testament in reference to human nature itself.

### God’s Identity

Often when God is identified in the Bible, this exclusive attribute is part of his title, identifying him as different from all other beings. He is the Living God.<sup>6</sup> He is the eternal God.<sup>7</sup> He is the immortal God.<sup>8</sup> He is the everlasting God.<sup>9</sup> His name and attributes endure forever.<sup>10</sup> By



contrast, humans are God's creatures. As such they are dying.<sup>11</sup> They are mortal.<sup>12</sup> They are perishable.<sup>13</sup> They fade away like the colour on a leaf.<sup>14</sup> They return to the dust from which they were made.<sup>15</sup>

God is different. He is exclusively immortal. This, as well as his other exclusive attributes – like holiness and omnipotence – make it appropriate for us to worship him exclusively. Conditional immortality is – at the heart of the issue – a doctrine which seeks to preserve what the Bible says about God.

## References

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:17.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Henry – *The Matthew Henry Commentary on the Bible* (1 Tim. 6:16).

<sup>4</sup> Robert A Peterson, in *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 9:25; 15:52; 1 Pet. 1:4, 23; 3:4

<sup>6</sup> Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26, 36; 2 Kgs 19:4, 16; Psa. 42:2; 84:2; Isa. 37:4, 17; Jer. 10:10; 23:36; Dan. 6:20, 26; Hos. 1:10; Matt. 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Rom. 9:26; 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16; 1 Tim. 3:15; 4:10; Heb. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; Rev. 7:2

<sup>7</sup> Deut. 33:27; Rom. 16:26.

<sup>8</sup> Rom. 1:23.

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 21:33; Isa. 40:28.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Chr. 16:34, 41; 2 Chr. 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21; Ezra 3:11; Psa. 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 111:3, 10; 112:3, 9; 117:2; 118:1ff, 29; 119:160; 135:13; 136:1ff; 138:8; Eccl. 3:14; Jer. 33:11; 2 Cor. 9:9.

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 35:18; 2 Chr. 16:13; 24:22; Job 24:12; Luke 8:42; John 11:37; Heb. 11:21.

<sup>12</sup> Job 4:17; Rom. 1:23; 6:12; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:53f; 2 Cor. 4:11; 5:4; Heb. 7:8.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 15:42, 50, 53f; 1 Pet. 1:23

<sup>14</sup> Psa. 37:2; Isa. 64:6; Jam. 1:11.

<sup>15</sup> Gen. 3:19; Job 10:9; 34:15; Psa. 90:3; Eccl. 3:20.



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# A Christian's Apology To Atheists

by Doug Smith

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From [EndlessHellEnded.com](http://EndlessHellEnded.com).

Dear Unbelieving Friend,

I'm writing to apologize to you. My fellow Christians and I have misrepresented the Bible to you and shared a false message. In so doing, we have kept you from knowing the God who made you.

Our most serious failure is our traditional doctrine that after death, people who don't follow Christ will suffer endless conscious torment in hell. Our message has been: "God loves you and sent His Son to die for your sins so you can live with him forever. However, if you don't accept His gift, you will burn in hell for an endless eternity." The endless hell part is not actually the Bible's message.

Our tradition has blinded us to the true message of the Bible. In many ways we have held our orthodoxy as more important than the God of the scriptures Himself.

Rightly, you have rejected this message. Unfortunately, but understandably, you've thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Years ago, I was among those who held tightly to the church's teaching on the subject of an endless hell. Even though it was unfathomable to me, I was a new believer so I just accepted the traditional view. I think most of my brothers & sisters in Christ are like I was.

After a few years as a Christian, I began an intense study of the scriptures for myself, and found that the Bible doesn't actually teach that hell will last for an endless eternity. It teaches that God is loving and just, and his justice is measured, merciful and fits the crime. Those who reject Him will be punished for their sins, then will cease to exist in literal, endless death.

I also very much regret that I have kept silent for so long on the truth from the Bible. I have been cow-



ardly, afraid to displease fellow believers who sometimes question the faith of those who question traditional doctrines like this one.

My sincere hope is that you would forgive us and reconsider your own views. If your foundation for rejecting Christ's message is that his followers have condemned you to an eternal hell for rejecting him, then you no longer have that excuse.

The God who made you really does love you. He really did send His Son to die for your sins and mine, and raised Him from a literal death to credibly offer a real, eternal life to everyone who would follow Him. This gift is available to *everyone*.

Now that you have read this, please give God and the Bible another chance. Study it for yourself and see what it really says. Don't be like I was, clinging to your unbelieving tradition so intensely that you don't think for yourself anymore. What's the risk in requesting our free e-book and learning to read the Bible for what it actually says?

I would love to have a dialog with anyone who is interested in finding

out more, whether in comments here, privately through email, or in person. Please request our free e-book and post in the comments that you'd like to talk further about these things.

*Written by Doug Smith at [EndlessHellEnded.com](http://EndlessHellEnded.com). Copyright 2011, all rights reserved. Please visit [EndlessHellEnded.com](http://EndlessHellEnded.com) for more information or to request a free copy of the e-book "Endless Hell Ended*



# What Happens when we die:

## Part II

By Armand Newrick

*(This is part of a series of messages that was preached at Hamilton Church of Christ, New Zealand in April 2011. The full audio version and text is available on the web-site.)*

### Introduction

Last Sunday we talked about what God might have meant when he said to Adam and Eve “you will surely die” in Genesis 2:17. We considered all that we could on this subject by doing searches on the relevant words such as, death, die, spirit, soul, heaven and hell to conclude that nowhere in the OT do we find support for the notion that a human being’s personality leaves their body to continue on consciously, somewhere, after death. This point is more widely accepted by biblical scholars today than what we might realize. McNamara writes – “*The general consensus {that of contemporary biblical scholars} is that the OT rejected any natural or innate immortality.*”<sup>1</sup>

However, there are two places, that I

am aware of, that have been used from the OT to challenge this assertion which I should just quickly make comment on before moving into considering what the Jews believed in the 400 year period that separates the Old and New Testaments.

In the first of these two places, Isaiah 14:9, we are told that *sheol*, or the grave, is all a-stir by the rousing of the spirits of the departed to greet the king of Babylon who will be brought down there. The chapter is not to be taken literally but is not untypical of Isaiah and the prophets in personifying lifeless items or places. Trees clap their hands and deserts feel the emotion of gladness etc. Just as the King of Babylon is said to have been dwelling in the heights of heaven during his reign (v. 12) he is now said to be laid down on a bed of maggots in *sheol* (v.11). This is non-literal,

poetic, prophetic language.

The second place in the OT which might challenge the view that the dead are dead is found in 1 Samuel 28 where we read of King Saul consulting a medium to bring up the spirit of the deceased Samuel. We must remember that in Deuteronomy 18:11 Israel was warned to never attempt to use a medium to try and contact the dead. Why would that be?

In the chapter Saul has a conversation with this “spirit” which we are told throughout the chapter is Samuel back from the dead. It is noteworthy that the medium never calls him Samuel only Saul does. In verse 19 “Samuel” tells Saul that the next day he will die at the hands of the Philistines in battle and join him in *sheol*. Clearly God had already abandoned Saul and would not reveal his will to him in any way no matter how hard Saul sought it. Therefore, in attempting to solicit the dead do we think that this really was Samuel rather than an impersonating spirit? According to the account in Chronicles when Saul was wounded the next day he in fact committed suicide by falling on his own sword.

Apart from these two questionable references the dead are dead in the OT until the resurrection of the dead.

### **Was the Hebrew OT View on the State of the Dead so consistently believed in the New Testament?**

So what happened in the 400 year period between the Testaments? Was the Hebrew Old Testament view of death held consistently by the Jews over that period until we arrive at the NT era? In short; no it wasn't! We see, for example, in Acts 23 Paul was able to divide the Sanhedrin, who were the governing body of the Jews, by declaring that he was a Pharisee (Acts 23:3) and therefore believed in the resurrection of the dead. We are told in verse 8 that the Sadducees not only didn't believe in a resurrection of the dead but neither did they believe in angels or spirits.

Who were the Sadducees and why didn't they believe in these things? It is believed by some that the Sadducees were a pure priestly line amongst the Jews who were ultra-conservative. In other words they believed that many foreign





ideas had crept into certain sectors of Jewish thought, particularly between the testaments. Indeed F.F. Bruce tells us that the term “Pharisee” was coined by the Sadducees as a designation of their opponents as Persianizers; adopting Persian eschatological ideas sometime in the post-exilic era. Surprisingly the resurrection of the dead was thought to be one of those later foreign ideas.

Hence we can understand the trick that the Sadducees tried to play on Jesus in Matthew 22:23-33 by asking him which husband a woman would have, who had been married and widowed several times throughout her life, if all her former husband’s should be resurrected from the dead at the same time.

**Many Jews were content to hold the Belief in the Immortality of the**

## **Soul together with the Resurrection**

Yet when we get to the NT documents the Jews were not united in their views on what happens when we die. Even the Pharisees, who did believe in a physical resurrection of the dead, were content to combine such a belief with notions foreign to the OT of going to heaven and hell as a disembodied immortal soul at the point of death. Jesus spoke numerous times to the Pharisees view on these issues.

Perhaps the best example of this can be found in Matthew 10:28. Many Christians who have argued for a conscious intermediate state, founded on the belief that a human being has two parts, a mortal body and an immortal soul, have immediately assumed that Jesus believed this to be true because he makes such a statement in this verse. Let’s not quickly forget, at this point, that nowhere throughout the OT was the *nephesh* “soul” spoken of as some immortal part of being human.

We must also bear in mind that Jesus is addressing a first century

audience who had been conditioned by the traditional teaching of the Pharisees and influenced by popular foreign views which were now happily held by many.

When the verse is read carefully, in light of popular beliefs, Jesus is in effect saying to his audience that the popular notion they have of an indestructible soul apart from the body is false because God can destroy everything in the end time fire of hell.

The word Gehenna is a term developed from the geographical valley of Ben Hinnom where King Ahab sacrificed his sons there in following the detestable practises of the nations (see also 2 Chron 33:6). If Jesus' notion of *Gehenna* (hell) is built upon the imagery that he adopts and uses

elsewhere in the Gospel accounts from Psalm 112:10 where the gnashing of teeth ceases in extinction and Isaiah 66:24 where the corpses of the annihilated are consumed by the undying worm and unquenchable fire then this imagery is reserved for the end of the age and not for an intermediate state. Furthermore, the OT sources suggest that this takes place in this world and not in some unseen world that runs concurrent with this physical one.

It has been believed, due to the influence of a number of old commentaries, that this geographical site was a rubbish dump in NT times and always kept alight for the consumption of the rubbish produced within the city of Jerusalem. The evidence for this claim is lacking. However, there is some evidence in later Jewish folklore that *Gehenna* became synonymous with *Sheol* as a type of purgatory where disembodied souls were purged until they were released due to their supposed immortal nature (cf. 3 Enoch 44:1-6; c. 2<sup>nd</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). Could some of these unusual ideas have been



entertained earlier in the minds of Jesus' original audience? If so then Jesus is declaring this a false belief as everything can be destroyed.

Was Jesus intent for his audience to think in terms of their folklore or to refer back to the OT sources; perhaps in a similar way to which Jesus used the Pharisees tradition in the telling of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus? We note that only once is Gehenna referred to in the NT not coming off Jesus lips (Jam 3:6). Some have suggested that James is a modified older Jewish piece of literature and this might reflect the folklore of *Gehenna* as a present burning fire in *Hades* able to set alight the tongue. *Gehenna* is nowhere mentioned in regards to the spread of Christianity throughout the Acts period or in Paul's letters; although Paul does speak of a fire in the end that will consume God's enemies.

The commentator R.T. France says in regards to Matt 10:28 "The intention is not to separate man into two parts but to point out that God can destroy the whole person." Jesus is countering popular foreign belief about what happens when we die by saying; there is not an immortal part to our makeup.

### **So when and how did the Jews adopt this Notion of an Immortal Soul?**

Many have reasoned that the Greek philosopher Plato, born in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, influenced Jewish thought in this direction when the Jews came into contact with these ideas some time from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC forward following Alexander the Great's successful conquest of the lands belonging to the Medo-Persian Empire. I am inclined to see this as a little simplistic. Although it is not uncommon for scholars to argue that the intertestamental writings of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha demonstrate that the Jews began to adopt foreign ideas, including the belief in the immortality of the soul, this is not entirely accurate either. As Edward Fudge states there was no consistent view of what happens when we die between the testaments. In fact the predominant view in all of this literature favours what we have already established in the OT.

Edward Fudge writes - "The people of intertestamental Judaism were living, breathing, thinking folk who sometimes differed vigorously



from each other on theological matters. This perfectly reasonable fact has not always come across in popular writings about this period.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not right to generalize on what the Jews believed during this period. For example, someone might pick up a quote like the following and quickly assume that all the Jews had changed their view on afterlife between the Testaments.

Apocrypha = Judith 16:17 (150 – 125 BC)

*“Woe to the nations that rise up against my race: The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the day of judgment, to put fire and worms in their flesh; And they shall weep and feel pain forever.”*

Even here this notion of eternal torment follows the resurrection judgment. It may just be that although the foreign notion of the immortality of the soul is not always clearly detected in this literature between the Testaments, it may nevertheless have been adopted as popular folk belief for many; as in Matt 10:28.

It is into this rather diverse world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew that we now

turn in considering the NT data on what happens when we die.

### **The Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus**

Perhaps one of the most magnetic passages in the NT that has influenced many Christians to believe in going immediately to heaven or hell at the point of death is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus found in Luke 16:19-31.

As any good scholar should recognize this story, or parable, did not originate with Jesus. Nothing compares to it in the OT and it is believed that it may have originated in Egypt. LeRoy Froom, the SDA scholar, claims that there are 7 very similar stories like this parable that can be found in the extant literature. I know of two of these.

In the writings of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD historian Josephus, Josephus argues for a subterranean Hades beneath the earth to detain “souls” at the point of death. This tells us that the Greeks themselves had such a similar story as Josephus recites it to them. This Hades is supposedly divided into two halves. On one side is the lake of unquenchable ev-



erlasting fire whereas the angel guides the righteous to his right hand to a region of light which is termed “the Bosom of Abraham” where they await to be released in the future to go straight to heaven. From here Josephus also argues for a resurrection of the bodily remains against the Greeks view that the body is to be discarded on account of all matter being inherently evil.

Also, in a late first century work known as 4 Ezra 7:26-44, at the end of the age everyone is resurrected from the dead at which time the pit of torment shall appear and opposite it the place of rest for the godly. These two places are further described as the “furnace of hell” standing directly opposite the “Paradise of delight”. The godly and godless shall be separated into these two places which will last for a period of seven years where the godless will perish like a mist. This is not an adaptation of Jesus teaching in

Luke 16 as this is a Jewish work and demonstrates some common earlier source which Jesus himself modifies in the Luke account.

Notice very carefully that Jesus is not talking about heaven and hell! He is talking about *Hades* divided into these two places. This in itself should deter us from using this parable as a reliable description of afterlife.

The purpose of the parable was not to teach on what happens when we die, but rather to add to a string of parables that were intended to address the prideful self assurance of the Pharisees that they were approved by God as evident in their wealth- hence the poor man who longed to eat the crumbs from the rich man’s table who was dressed in purple (the Pharisee). This parable is not recognized by reputable scholars as a source for making doctrinal assertions about what happens when we die; as no parable should be. Parables are stories with fictitious characters and exaggerated details used to often address a moral issue in a subversive way, i.e. the pride of the



Pharisees in their money as the sign of God's approval in this life and for the next.

### **Souls under the Alter**

In a similar way many suppose that a passage found in Revelation 6:9-11 teaches us that disembodied souls go straight to heaven at the point of death. Apocalyptic literature, like parables, is not the place to be establishing doctrine as this literature type is notoriously symbolic. The reference to the "altar" suggests to us the sacrifice called for by Christians to be faithful and true to God. Notice that this picture is restricted only to martyrs –



those who die for the faith.

If the term "soul" is understood as the whole person, as in the OT understanding, then it appears a very symbolic picture of the life of the martyred awaiting vindication for their unjust deaths.

Because they cry out "how long, Sovereign Lord faithful and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood" it is assumed that these are disembodied souls in heaven talking and feeling; very much alive. This is not necessarily so.

In a similar way, we read in Genesis 4:10 of the blood of Abel crying out to God from the ground for vindication from such an unjust end at the hands of Cain. Notice also that this "altar", under which these souls' lay, is not described in John's vision of heaven in chapters 4-5. Is the altar simply a symbol for the ground upon which their blood was spilt? Also, how big would this "altar" need to be, if taken literally, to put all these souls underneath it? This is highly symbolic!

The white robe is also obviously symbolic for the righteousness that these martyrs have attained through the faithful sacrifice of their lives. John is calling his audience to be similarly faithful to death if needed; to make up the full number required to bring in the end of the age. I wouldn't think that phantom souls could dress in literal white apparel, do you? Such a vision appears to be drawn from a common source as the contemporaneous works of 2 Baruch 23:4-7 and 4 Ezra 2:34-41 also tell of a number that needs to be made up and white clothes etc.

We also notice that this scene is viewed by John after the 5<sup>th</sup> seal has been opened and in anticipation of the opening of the sixth seal. In Rev 20:4 their cry for "vengeance" is answered in their coming to life at the end of the age. Why would they need to come to life if they are already literally alive, wearing white clothes and talking in heaven? The coming to life to reign with Christ in Rev 20:4 seems somewhat superfluous.

Personally I do not recognize the genres of parable nor apocalyptic as sound bases upon which to argue for a conscious intermediate state.

## Conclusion

Next Sunday we will consider the hand full of NT passages that one reputable scholar (Richard Bauckham) has suggested as the only NT sources available by which one *might* infer from them a belief in a conscious intermediate state prior to the resurrection.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Martin McNamara, Miltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Dublin, Ireland (1997).

<sup>2</sup>*Fire that Consumes*, p. 133.



***Armand Newrick has had a keen interest in theology since his teenage conversion (See Issue 30) and came to the conditionalist position about eight years into his walk with the Lord. He is married to Suzanne and they have two children Daniel and Emma***

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# Statement of Faith

1. We believe in God and His one and only Son, Jesus the Christ. Heb. 11:6; John 14:1; 3:16; 20:31; Mat. 16:16.
2. We believe in the Holy Spirit. 2Pet. 1:21; 1Cor. 6:19; Jude 20; Eph. 3:5.
3. We believe that Jesus died for us and gave himself a ransom for all. Rom. 5:8; 1Cor. 15:3; 1Tim. 2:6.
4. We believe that God raised Jesus from the dead; that by resurrection He became Lord of both the dead and the living, and the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep; and that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. Rom. 10:9; 14:9; 1Cor. 15:20; John 3:16.
5. We believe that baptism is commanded by Christ, was practiced by His Apostles, and is taught in the New Testament. Mat. 28:18,19; Acts 8:12,38.
6. We believe that all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the people of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2Tim. 3:16,17.
7. We believe that human beings are by nature mortal. Gen. 2:7; 3:19; 1Tim. 6:16; 2Tim. 1:10; Rom. 2:6-7.
8. We believe that human beings in death are unconscious. Psa. 6:5; 115:17; Ecc. 9:5,10. This is likened to "sleep". Job 14:12; Psa. 13:3; Jer. 51:39; Dan. 12:2; John 11:11-14; 1Cor. 15:51.
9. We believe that immortality is obtained only through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. 1Cor. 15:21-23; 2Tim. 4:7-8; 1John 5:9-12.
10. We believe that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, to be followed by the Judgment. Acts 24:15; John 5:25,28,29; Rev. 20:12,13.
11. We believe that evil and evil-doers shall be finally destroyed. Psa. 145:20; Mat. 10:28 Rom. 6:21; Phil. 3:19; Heb. 2:14; 1John 3:8; Rev. 22:3.
12. We believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Acts 1:11; John 14:3; 1Thes. 4:16.