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from death to **life**

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life · death · resurrection · eternal destinies · bible teaching

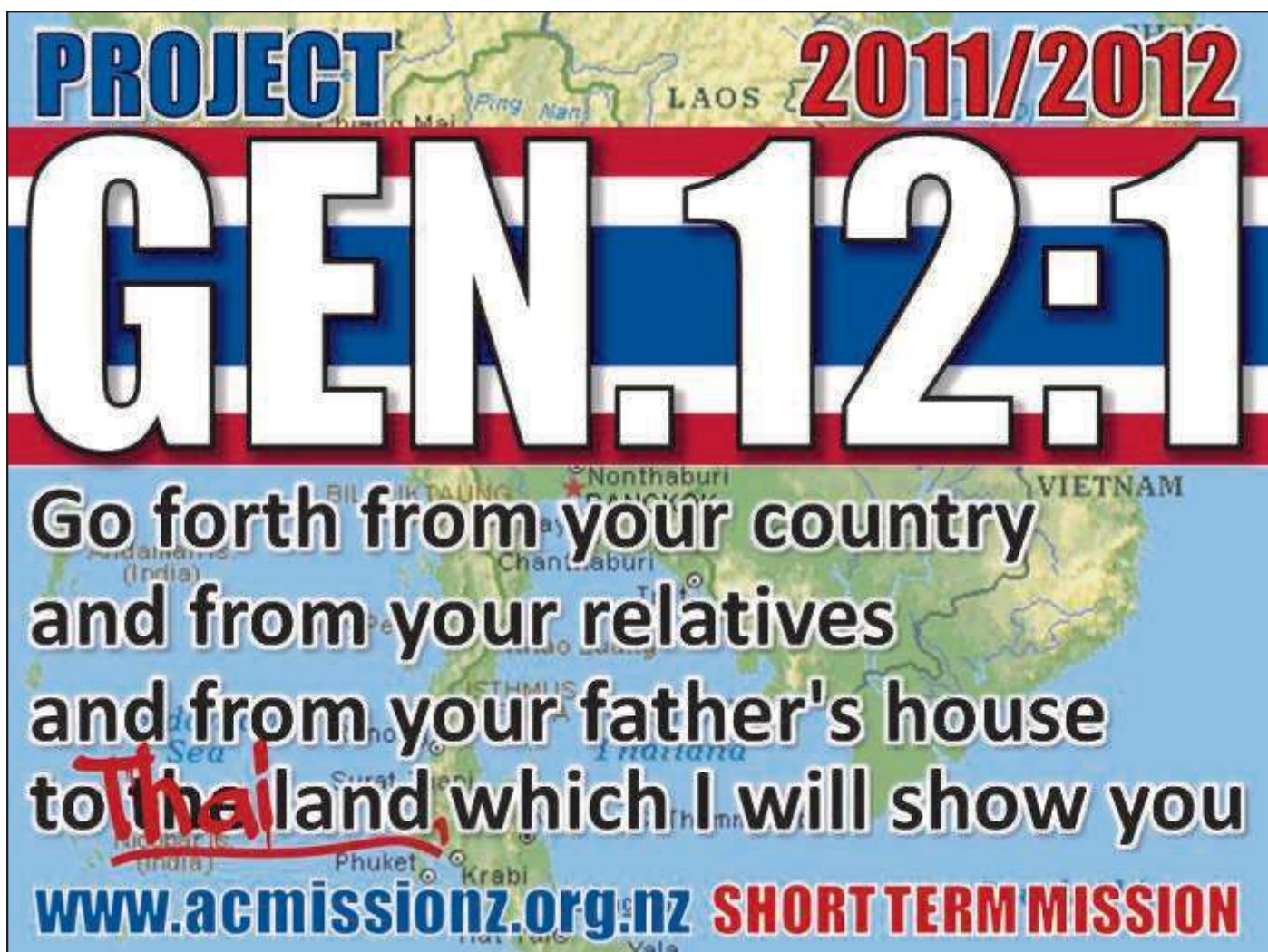
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Welcome to Issue 49.

Rob Bell has ignited the debate on hell on the blogosphere with his book *Love Wins*. You will find Jefferson Vann's review of *Love Wins* on page seven. I would like to recommend to you, Jefferson Vann's article "Hell is Permanent" on page eleven. It addresses one of the most significant arguments against annihilationism with fresh insight. We also introduce a series from Armand Newrick on "What happens when we die?" The full audio version and text is available on the website. Also included in this issue is a review of *The Tree of Life* by Paul Sellman and an excerpt from *The Bible Standard* that addresses the issue of Everlasting Punishment.

Tarnya Burge *co-editor*

{Note: In the online version of this publication the underlined text links to the associated webpage}



PROJECT 2011/2012

GEN. 12:1

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

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Production

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From Off the Shelf

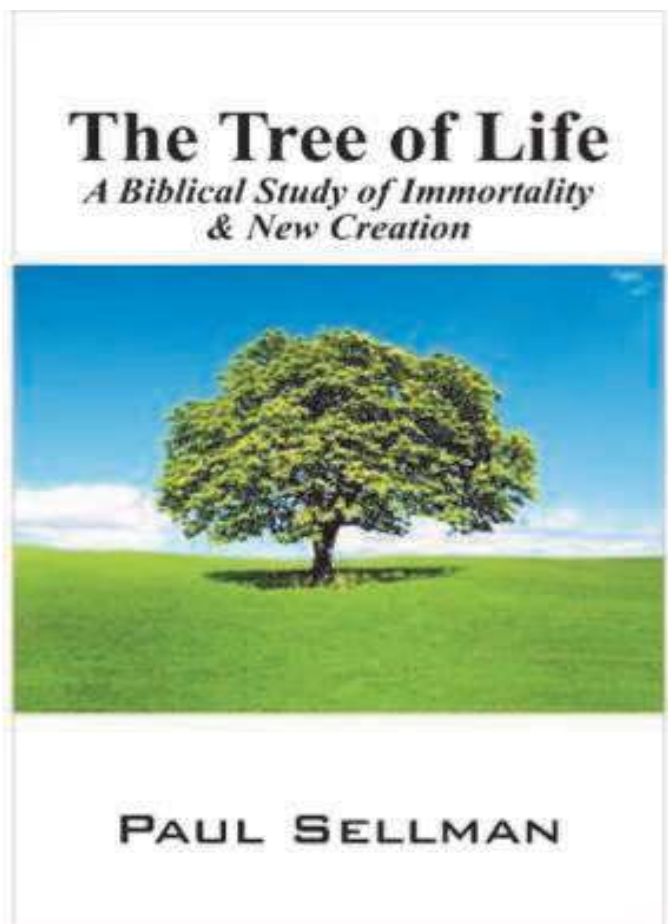
Book Review of The Tree of Life:

A Biblical Study of Immortality & New Creation by Paul Sellman
© 2010, Outskirts Press, Inc.

Reviewed by Jefferson Vann

Pastor Paul Sellman has produced a significant study in biblical theology for the modern context. Much like John Stott and Edward Fudge, Sellman came to his study of the issues of life, death and destiny convinced that people go to their rewards at death. His study of the scriptures has revealed a different outlook. He now sees that death is not the answer to humanity's problem, it is part of that problem. The solution to humanity's problem is Jesus Christ, whose return will mean the end of evil, and an

asks his readers to put aside their preconceived notions and to



This Age

**The Age to
Come**

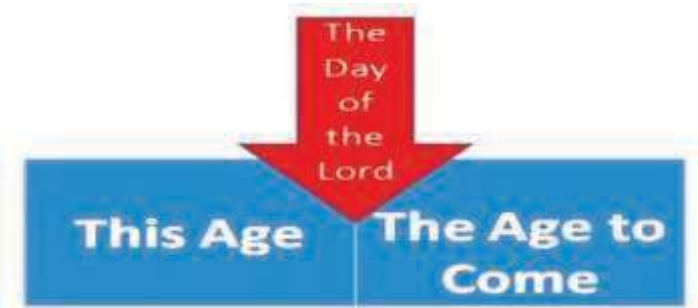
eternal new beginning for the saved.

The genius of Sellman's approach to this controversial subject is his way of simplifying these very complex issues. He

imagine all history as being represented by two ages: this age, and the age to come.

This age is the age of mortality because humanity rebelled against God in Eden, thus lost the

opportunity to take of the tree of life and live forever. The age to



come is an age of restoration where God renews heaven and earth with life eternal as it was meant to be. The crucial event which will put an end to this age of mortality and usher in the age of eternal life is what the Bible calls the Day of the Lord.

Sellman shows from scripture that this Day of the Lord is an event taught in both Testaments. It is the Day of Jesus Christ and the Day of his return, and Resurrection Day, and Judgment Day. It is the essential event in all history, since it divides the two ages. It corrects the problems of this age, and explains the destiny of those who will by God's grace make it into the next.

Sellman attacks some of the theological traditions within popular Christianity that tend to obscure this way of looking at things. Chief among these traditions is the concept borrowed

from Greek philosophy that all human souls are already immortal. Sellman argues that this is "an unbiblical presupposition" (152) which has led Christians who read the Bible to "see something that isn't there" (172). He calls this view "the great heresy of all existence" (195). Immortality was lost in Eden, and will not be



gained back "until the rebellion that lost it is ended" (197).

To Sellman, "good theology is based upon what is clearly taught, and then filled in by the less certain elements" (91). What is clearly taught in scripture is humanity's need for eternal life in this age; God's plan to fill that

need in the age to come; and the Day of the Lord which will make God's plan reality.

So, until that great event of the Day of the Lord arrives, those who die wait unconscious in their graves for resurrection – either to eternal life or to the second death. That is why the Bible calls Christians who have died *asleep in Christ*.

It is impossible for a reviewer to like everything about a book -- so there are a few changes that might improve this work in its next edition. Here is a short list of suggestions:

1. The frequent use of the first person is a style matter, but it seems to detract from the scholarly nature of the study.
2. Quotes from the Bible are everywhere in this work, but the font, italics, and justification combined in quotations tend to make some of the text run together.
3. Sellman steers away from a number of technical and complicated issues and avoids getting carried away in discussing particularly problematic texts. This is a good thing, but might be seen by opponents of his position as "chickening out."

A few well-placed reference notes to popular works (like that of Stott and Edwards) which do get into those texts might help.

4. *The Tree of Life* is not yet available in electronic book format. If it were, this review would have been written sooner!

The Tree of Life is a skilful and contemporary approach to questions that God's people have been asking since the time of the patriarchs. It is the kind of book that pastors can pass on to new church members, who are just getting to know about the issues of life, death, and destiny. It helps to explain the way things are, and what our appetites for the way things will be. ■



Jefferson Vann and his wife Penny have been missionaries with Advent Christian General

Conference since 1996. They have served 13 years as professors at Oro Bible College in the Philippines.

WHY SO IMPORTANT?

Republished from gracEmail®

by Edward Fudge

A gracEmail subscriber asks: "Are you fixated on hell?" [No.] "Do you derive pleasure from contemplating the subject?" [None.] "Do you consider this a 'salvation' issue?" [Absolutely not!] "Is agreement on this topic necessary for fellowship?" [No.] "Why devote so much attention to the topic?" [There are at least two very important reasons.]

* * *

First, whoever claims to speak for God is obligated to do so accurately. Scripture is filled with warnings to anyone who abuses this trust or takes it lightly. The subject of final punishment is particularly hazardous because it is inextricably tied to God's own reputation and character. Undeniably, our natural instincts are unable to discern God's character and are unfit to judge it. But in this situation, God himself declares his character and challenges us to imitate him. Jesus adds that whoever looks at him

sees the Father also. Further, believers are said to possess moral intuition, and they are expected by practice to heighten its sensitivity and usefulness.

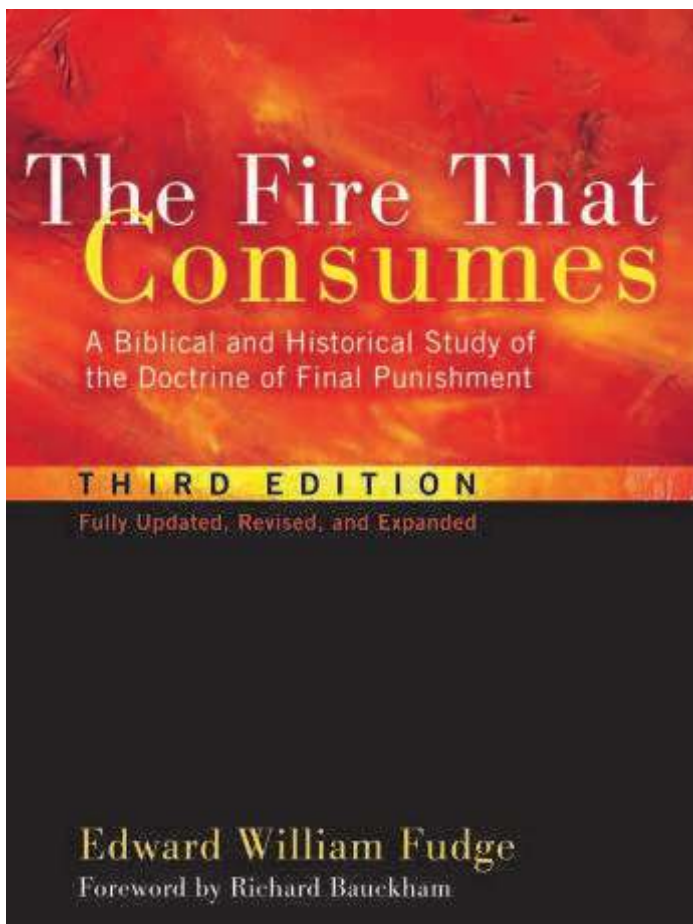
We read in John 3:16 that God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so believers will not perish but have eternal life. In that light, it is fair to ask if that same God now intends to toss billions of those same people into something resembling a lake of volcanic lava, then actively intervene to prevent their demise so they will suffer unspeakable pain forever. If God intends nothing of the kind, could one possibly invent a more scandalous lie with which to besmirch his holy, righteous, loving and just character?

Every day devout, God-fearing believers are studying their Bibles afresh and rejecting the traditional theory of conscious unending torment--including some of the most highly-respected scholars (Richard Bauckham, N. T. Wright), commentators (F. F.

Bruce), and preachers (John Stott) in the world. ■

For an idea why, Edward Fudge invites you to read the first 32 pages of *The Fire That Consumes*. To download this valuable excerpt, go to

[www.EdwardFudge.com/
excerptTFTC3.pdf](http://www.EdwardFudge.com/excerptTFTC3.pdf)



FROM THE PAST

Bible Standard May 1879

Everlasting Punishment a quote from Rev. H Constable

The following remarks, penned by the Rev. H. Constable, are worthy of attention:

“There are some who tell us that the eternal deprivation of a blessed life is not an eternal punishment. They think the punishment is over the moment that the pains of the second death have ceased to be felt. What do such reasoners mean? Is the punishment of death inflicted here by human laws upon criminals over when the criminal is dead? No; it has then only begun. It lasts in all its force far every year, every day, every moment of that life of which it has deprived the criminal. Else that death which all legislature has esteemed the greatest punishment, and which same men think too great to be inflicted even for the greatest crimes, is of all punishments the shortest and least. But such is not man’s judgment of death. He esteems it, and justly, the greatest, the sorest, the most lasting punishment he can possibly inflict. He thinks so, ut-

terly irrespective of anything he may believe, with or without reason, will happen after death. Death is thus esteemed whether it is inflicted upon the good man or the evil. Death is thus esteemed by those who believe that rewards and punishments commence with the separate soul, or who believe that Hades is a silent land of sleep and unconsciousness for all, good and bad alike.

“And thus we are to judge of that second death in Gehenna which is to all the last, whenever it comes, an everlasting sleep. It has deprived the sinner, not of a few brief chequered years of mingled joy and sorrow, but of an eternal life, across whose brightness comes no shade, no sadness, no change; which ever stretches an into the limitless future, and finds its peace and joy growing and deepening. Is not the deprivation of this life for sin an eternal punishment? Yes; it is a punishment which the lapse of countless ages shall not reverse: it is a destruction from which eternity itself will not restore. No message of mercy will again be sent to those lost ones. They die in the second death to rise and live no more. No powerful voice will ever sound in those deaf ears. No breath from God, the Life-Giver,

ever enters into those dry bones, lays sinews upon them, brings on them flesh, covers them with skin, puts breath into them, and causes them to live once more.

“The angel of death has spread his wings upon the blast of judgment, and breathed upon that exceeding great army which has followed here the banners of the prince of darkness. When they who have here followed the Prince of Life shall have arisen in the morning of their endless being, one after another, and loud shall rise their note of praise to God, who has thus, in a just judgment, blotted out evil from His world, and made all things once more very good.” ■



Bell's Base Cards

Book Review of *Love Wins* by Rob Bell

Reviewed by Jefferson Vann

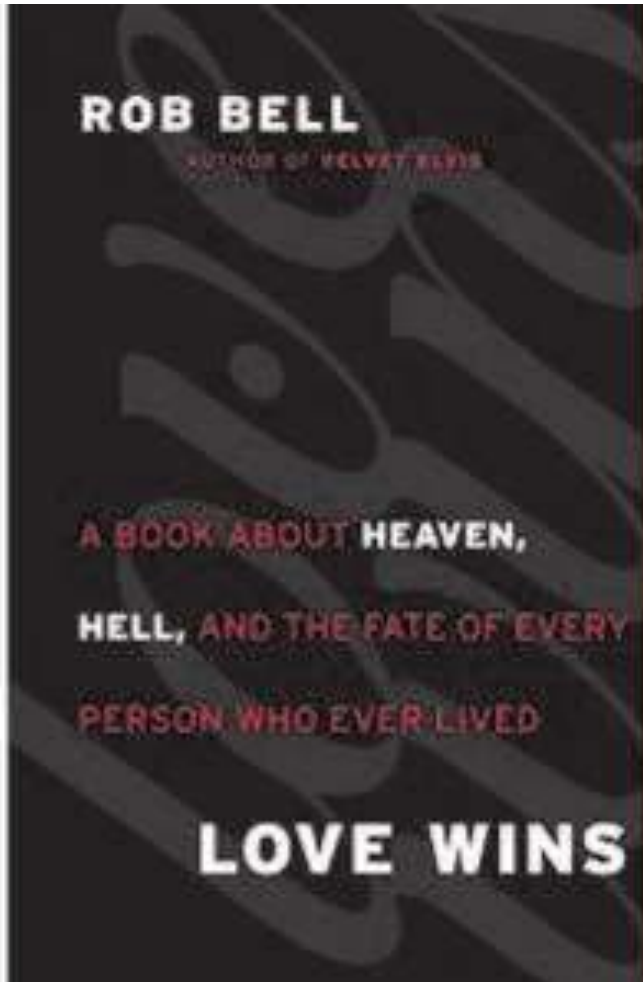
Rob Bell does a masterful job of shaking the foundations of the modern theology of human destiny in his new book entitled *Love Wins*.¹ He exposes the fact that much of what people say about salvation and human destiny is not based on the Bible, therefore does not hold up to the scrutiny of direct questioning. He dares to ask direct questions – many of them.



His tactic is similar to that of knocking down base cards in someone's house of cards. A house of cards can be an enormous thing, but it is only as strong as the first few cards one lays out. Those base cards serve as the foundation. If

they are stable, one can build fortresses out of flimsy cards upon them. But topple those base cards and the entire thing falls apart. Bell's identified some flimsy base cards in modern theology: the idea that only professing believers will go to heaven and its corollary that all others will suffer in hell forever.

He attacked those familiar base cards by appealing to scripture after scripture to show that the Bible addresses very different issues. He wanted to show that the whole of modern theology about human destiny was built upon assumptions that do not come from the Bible. He accomplished that mission. Each chapter in the book identifies a presupposition, and then proceeds to topple it by going to the text of scripture and comparing the presupposition to what scripture actually says. In short, Bell does theology and he does it well.



Nevertheless, Bell's book is destined to be much maligned. He has taken on subjects which are practically taboo for evangelical Christians. "Heaven when you die" and "conscious eternal suffering for the lost" are concepts that are too holy for most good church people to investigate. Expect Bell to be branded a hopeless Universalist. Expect retaliation. Expect *The Da Vinci Code* all over again.

...And rightfully so. Any good theologian worth his or her salt makes a difference. Bell has swung a pendulum, and one should expect the thing to swing back in the

other direction. Paul told the Corinthians that "there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."² Bad theology can mobilize good theology.

With that in mind, let me tell you where I think Bell has it wrong. He spends numerous pages showing that the gospel message is not about going to heaven when you die – then he puts the saved in heaven when they die. He can do no other, because for Bell (and most of his opponents) the human soul has to live eternally somewhere. Bell sweeps away all of the scriptural evidence that he has amassed against the concept that heaven is a destination. In the end, he says what he has been arguing against.

He agrees with his opponents that all human beings are immortal, except that, unlike them, he argues that their immortality gives human beings hope for restoration to God even after their bodies die. He argues from scripture that God is love and therefore never gives up on his own. So, as long as there is life, there is hope. He argues for the concept of future probation on the basis



of two premises: God never stops loving, and human beings never stop living.

Herein is the problem: none of Bell's opponents want to deny either of those premises. They believe that God is both loving and just. They want to agree with what the Bible says about his love, but not forget that it gives equal time to his wrath. When they talk about Judgment Day, they envision that it will be just that – a day in which God will judge humanity, and determine the eternal fate of everyone. They cannot envision a Judgment Day that extends to however many years and centuries needed to purge humanity of all sin and rescue all. Hence, they must be-

lieve that death seals the fate of all.

The all important doctrine that Bell and most of his opponents agree upon is the concept of innate immortality: that all humans are born immortal. That doctrine will lead Bell's opponents to insist on eternal conscious suffering in hell for the lost. It leads Bell to insist that a loving God would never condemn people to such a fate for a limited life of sin; therefore he must give opportunity for restoration.

Allow me then – in Rob Bell fashion – to suggest that it is that presupposition that keeps both Bell and his opponents from seeing what the Bible says about the destiny of the lost. The Bible says that

only God is immortal.³ Immortality is a promise from God that Christ will give to the saved – it is not an innate characteristic of every human.⁴ For anybody to live anywhere forever, they must have eternal life. Eternal life is promised to the saved only.⁵

What, then, is the destiny of the lost? The God of justice who gave us his truth in his word has decreed that the lost will be destroyed.⁶ Since the wages of sin is death, they will die.⁷ They will be appropriately punished according to the decree of a God who is both loving and just, and then they will be no more.⁸ They have been granted one life to live. That one life is a gift of grace from God. Nobody deserves to live forever. God is under no obligation to give unbelievers an eternal life, either to suffer, or to repent. He is sovereign, and if he has decided that the wages of sin is death, no theologian has the right to convert the sentence.

Bell wrote a book about a victory. He envisions an eternity in which all sin is forgiven, all wrongs are righted, and love wins. He is absolutely right. Love will win because God will win. God will win because he is God, not because he is love. His love and justice work together to produce a heaven and earth

without evil. Our participation in that victory is not a given. Some will not make it. That is what it ultimately means to be lost. In the end, God wins. Reader, where do you stand before God? Don't take his patience for granted. ■

References

- ¹ *Rob Bell, LOVE WINS: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived. (Robert H. Bell, Jr. Trust, 2011).*
- ² *1 Corinthians 11:19.*
- ³ *Romans 1:23; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16.*
- ⁴ *Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:53-54; 1 Timothy 1:10.*
- ⁵ *Matthew 25:46; John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68, 10:28; 12:25; Acts 13:46, 48; Romans 2:7; 5:21; 6:22; 1 Timothy 6:12; 1 John 5:11; Jude 1:21.*
- ⁶ *Matt. 10:28; 22:7; Luke 17: 27, 29; 20:16; 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:13; 15:24, 26; Heb. 10:39; 2 Peter 2:12; Rev. 11:18.*
- ⁷ *Matt. 21:41; John 5:24; 8:51; Romans 6:16, 23; 1 Cor. 15:26, 54; James 5:20; 1 John 3:14; Rev. 21:8.*
- ⁸ *Psalm 104:35; Ezekiel 26:21; 27:36; 28:19.*

Hell is Permanent

Jefferson Vann

Travis Allen, director of Internet Ministry for *Grace to You*, recently posted an article entitled “[Is Hell Really Endless?](#)” Allen’s article defends the concept that final punishment by God is a process that will never end. Allen rejects the view he calls *Annihilationism*, which is “a denial of the endlessness of hell.”¹

Allen asserts that annihilationism “seems to be making a strong resurgence today among evangelicals. That may be an overstatement, but it is a helpful correction to the assumption many have that the view only exists among the cults and theological liberals. Most of us who are labelled annihilationist² argue from the same belief in an inerrant, infallible, authoritative scripture as Allen and John MacArthur do. We are solidly in the evangelical camp, and reject the concept of an endless hell on scriptural grounds. We appreciate it when that is admitted.

Allen accurately portrays our view when he says we “don’t allow (God’s wrath) to extend beyond the lake of fire.” As we read the book of Revelation, the lake of fire is precisely described as the place of final

punishment, and that the lake itself will commence the second death, from which there is no possible resurrection. It is the ultimate end of the old age, and its consummation will make room for the new heavens and new earth.

The Bible teaches that every sin not atoned for by the blood of Christ will be punished thoroughly in that lake of fire, then death and hell itself will be thrown into it. These words describe an end – a solution to a problem that had a beginning. It is fitting that Revelation should give us the story of how God’s grace will eventually correct the result of the rebellion which is recorded in Genesis.

This second death will be a horrible, agonizing, event in which every transgression against God’s holiness will receive its appropriate punishment. Not until that happens – and God is thoroughly vindicated – will he “snuff every unbeliever out of existence.” He will do so because he has determined what the ultimate wages of sin are. He did not decree that

sinner will have the luxury of an eternal life anywhere – not even hell. The wages of sin is death. Eternal life is a gift he has reserved for those he has saved by grace.

Allen makes four specific assertions about how we argue our case against an endless hell. Each of these assertions speak to the heart of the issue, so each is worthy of analysis and a reply.

1) Allen asserts that we redefine the word *eternal*.

Allen quotes John MacArthur, who asserts that annihilationists “would like to redefine the word *aionios* and say, ‘well, it doesn’t really mean forever.’” He refers specifically to Matthew 25:46, where Jesus describes two final destinies. Jesus says that the sheep (those who treated the least of his brothers with compassion) will go away into eternal life. The goats (those who do not treat the least of his brothers kindly) will go away into eternal punishment.

The word *aionios* is an adjective. Its purpose is to explain and further define another word – in this case a noun. Like any other adjective (indeed, practically any other word) *aionios* has more than one possible meaning. For example, the adjective “hot” may describe the day’s temperature, or it may explain that

certain jewels have been stolen. The meaning of the adjective depends a great deal upon the noun it modifies. Any one adjective can have a number of possible meanings in its semantic range. The term itself has no set meaning. Its meaning is determined by the context – in this case, the noun it modifies.

Annihilationists are not guilty of redefining the term *eternal*. In Matthew 25:46 the term *eternal* is used twice. In both cases the term modifies an event in such a way as to draw attention to its finality, and so *aionios* should thus be translated *permanent*. In one case – eternal life -- the noun *life* clearly depicts the event when believers will inherit immortality: permanent life.³ In the other case, the term *punishment* also describes an event: destruction in hell. Both the noun *kolasis* and its corresponding verb *kolazō* refer to an anticipated event.⁴ The Bible elsewhere describes this event as “the day of the LORD”⁵ or “the day of judgment.”⁶ When the noun that *aionios* defines refers to an event in time, then the meaning implied by

aionios is not *perpetual*. A more accurate definition in that case is *permanent*. The English word *eternal* can mean either.

Other biblical examples of this use of *aionios* include:

- the permanent sin which can never be forgiven (Mark 3:29).
- the permanent weight of glory compared with our slight momentary affliction (2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Peter 5:10).
- the permanent things that are unseen compared to the transient things that are seen (2 Corinthians 4:18).
- the permanent house (body) in the heavens compared to our temporary tent (body) on earth (2 Corinthians 5:1).
- the permanent destruction the lost will face at Christ's return (2 Thessalonians 1:9).
- the permanent comfort and good hope we have through God's grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16).
- the permanent glory that accompanies salvation in Christ (2 Timothy 2:10).
- Philemon's permanent return to Colossae, after being parted from them for a while (Philemon 1:15).
- The permanent salvation made possible by Jesus, our great high priest (Hebrews 5:9).
- The permanent judgment that will take place after the resurrection of the dead (Hebrews 6:2).
- The permanent redemption secured by Christ's sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 9:12).
- the permanent covenant made possible by the shedding of the blood of Christ (Hebrews 13:20).
- entrance into the permanent kingdom provided for all those who make their calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Most other uses of *aionios* in the New Testament are when the term describes God,⁷ or something that comes from God: his gospel,⁸ or the fire he uses to destroy the wicked on judgment day.⁹ In neither of these cases is the emphasis on duration. The emphasis is on God as the source. That is why Jude tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as examples of undergoing a punishment of *aionios* fire. Sodom and Gomorrah were completely destroyed. The destruction was

not a perpetual process, but an event in which they were punished by God, the eternal one.

Greek adjectives can appear in plural form, and when that is done to *aionios* in the New Testament, it is so that the term can modify a plural noun,¹⁰ or it refers to an event predicted or promised long ago, which has now been fulfilled or revealed. The three examples of this are:

- “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret **for long ages.**”¹¹
- “Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus **before the ages began.**”¹²
- The final example actually uses *aionios* twice, once in the sense of *permanent*, and once in the sense of *something promised long ago* “in hope of **eternal** life, which God, who never lies, promised **before the ages began.**”¹³

In summary, annihilationists are

not redefining *aionios*. This article has surveyed every use of *aionios* in the New Testament and has not found a single reference where it has to describe a perpetual process. Once released from the shackles of the presuppositions of pagan philosophy, we are simply free to describe how the Bible consistently uses the term.

2) Allen asserts that we object to an endless hell on moral grounds.

Allen claims that annihilationists cannot fathom a holy and merciful God perpetually torturing billions of people in hell because we see it as “a form of cruel and unusual punishment.” We do often make arguments like this, but not as a means of judging God on our standards. We simply point out that the picture of God that the Bible uniformly presents is of One whose justice is always tempered by mercy. He destroyed the earth with a flood, but in his mercy saved Noah’s family and the animals with the ark. He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins, but saved Lot and his daughters by his mercy. The psalmist declares, “his anger is but for a moment, and his favour

is for a lifetime.”¹⁴

Our real objection to a perpetual hell on moral grounds is that we see it as inconsistent with God’s character as revealed in his word. Perhaps there are those who go too far with this line of reasoning and say “if God were a God who tortured people forever, then I would not believe in him.” The only logical response to such an argument is “then you would be tortured forever.” We try not to cross that line in our arguments against a perpetual hell. We honestly believe that when all the biblical evidence is presented, God is not revealed to be a sadistic monster who will keep people alive forever simply to torment them.

3) Allen asserts that we fail to understand the theology of justice.

Allen spends four out of 13 paragraphs in his post arguing that annihilationists reject an endless hell because we do not get how sinful sin is, and how holy God is. He says our view “fails to account for a lawgiver who is infinite and eternal by nature.” He implies that if we really understood God, then we would see how a never-ending hell fits into his plan. To be fair, he admits that even those who believe in a place of perpetual torture have

problems with it when they contemplate its severity. He insists, however, that those contemplations are there because of “how little we understand the sinfulness of sin on the one hand, and the holiness of God on the other.” He argues that since God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9), then we should ignore those contemplations and accept a perpetual hell on faith.

But we annihilationists are theologians too. We know how dangerous it can be when God’s people are told to accept a line of reasoning on faith, and to avoid questioning. From the Gospels, it is clear that Jesus spent a great deal of his time on earth questioning and arguing against the contemporary theologians and accepted doctrines of his day.

It is true that God’s thoughts are not our own. It does not follow that the doctrine of an endless hell clearly represents God’s thoughts. We argue that the doctrine of an endless hell is the result of the syncretistic combination of what the Bible says about final punishment with the pagan philosophy of innate immortality. The idea of a perpet-

ual hell was created out of this syncretism. It reasoned not from the nature of sin or the nature of God but from Plato's doctrine of the nature of man.

Since Augustine (whom Allen quotes as an authority) accepted Plato's idea of innate immortality of the soul, he reasoned that hell must be perpetual because the soul of man cannot die. It was for that reason that he rejected the idea of a hell of limited duration as "the height of absurdity." But if one accepts the clear statements of scripture that God alone has immortality,¹⁵ and God will punish sinners by destroying them,¹⁶ so that they exist no more,¹⁷ it becomes clear that Plato's innate immortality theory cannot be accepted on the same basis as scripture. They contradict each other.

Perhaps that is why Allen does not argue for human immortality, but chooses rather to defend perpetual hell on the basis of the sinfulness of sin and the holiness of God. But, even there, the argumentation fails. Allen argues that because God is infinite, then sins against him require infinite punishment. If that were so, then how could Jesus atone for the sins of all humanity by merely dying on the cross and remaining dead for a few

days? Surely if the punishment for any sin against God *requires* perpetual suffering, then Christ should still be on the cross!

The Bible clearly states what God requires to pay for sins. The wages of sin is death¹⁸ – not perpetual suffering. Not satisfied with this clear description of just punishment for sin, proponents of the concept of perpetual hell simply redefine death – as eternal separation from God. This can only be the case if the person who dies cannot really die. Again, we see that the theology behind the perpetual hell idea is not really based on the nature of God, but is derived from Greek dualism and its understanding of the nature of humanity.

Neither does the concept of a holy God require a perpetual hell. In fact, God's holiness requires that sin and unrighteousness be destroyed – not kept alive and tormented eternally. There was a point in time in eternity past, when there was no sin – no rebellion. Everything was good in God's universe. Then sin entered heaven through the rebellion of Satan and eventually came to humanity and earth by Adam and Eve's

transgression.

Ever since sin entered God's realm, he has been at work to destroy it. There is nothing within his character that requires that he tolerate it. He has a plan that includes the undoing of the curse of sin, and the undoing of the consequences – including death. God's holiness demands that the plan be carried out. The sin which has infected his universe will be eradicated, and all that is under him will again be his. The doctrine of an endless hell requires God to capitulate. It robs God of his sovereignty – insisting that sin is just as eternal as he is, and there is finally nothing that he can do about it.

Those who accept this notion are imprisoned by a pagan theology that finds no place in the Bible. Until they come to reject the concept of the immortal soul they will always have to place the immortal souls of dead sinners somewhere. A perpetual hell seems the logical place.

4) Allen asserts that we refuse to embrace the hard doctrines of the Bible.

Allen implies that those who accept the concept of a perpetual hell have embraced “the hard doctrines of the Bible” and that is evidence that their faith is

“true” and “God-given.” The assumption, of course, is that the Bible teaches this hard doctrine. If the Bible actually teaches that hell will be perpetual, then all believers should accept it as truth, no matter how hard or easy it is.

Annihilationists argue that the doctrine of endless torture is not clearly taught in the Bible. We argue that those passages which *appear* to teach it are being misread. Many of our writings examine those texts because our concern is that this hard doctrine is hard because it really does not fit the evidence.

It is true that some of the doctrines the Bible clearly teaches are difficult to get a handle on. Anyone who has struggled with the implications of God's sovereignty and how it affects man's will can attest to this fact. God is complicated and we should not expect his word to be always easy to understand.

It is also true that accepting the things we learn in scripture is evidence that our faith is genuine. The Holy Spirit works in the hearts and minds of believers, giving them insight into what God means by what he said in scripture. We call this the illumination of the Holy Spirit. With-

out His guidance, believers would be prone to all kinds of deceptions and false theologies.

History has shown, however, that the illumination of the Holy Spirit does not guarantee that all Bible-believing Christians will agree with each other, or that a doctrine that is popular is also biblical. In fact, many doctrines over the ages which were extremely well-received by the Church have been proven to be unbiblical and discarded.

The doctrine of perpetual hell, which grants eternal life to sinners and requires that they spend eternity alive “outside of the mercy of God” should be discarded. While it is obviously a hard doctrine – and “an absolutely horrible, terrifying doctrine” – it has always had its dissenters who are convinced that it is not a biblical doctrine. There is no advantage to holding to an unbiblical doctrine. Holding to an unbiblical doctrine cannot be evidence of the veracity of one’s faith.

An Alternative

Annihilationists believe in a literal hell which will appear at the end of the age. It is the lake of fire of Revelation, and it will burn as hot as it needs to burn. It will

be a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.¹⁹ It will include all those who regret their not coming to faith, and all those who defy God’s right to judge them to the very end. It is the place of final justice. All wrongs will be dealt with. In the end, God will be vindicated. Everyone in hell will understand that it is their own sins and rebellion that put them there. It will last as long as it needs to last for every deserved punishment to be meted out. It is the final historical event of the present age.²⁰ In it, God will destroy the lost completely, soul and body.²¹

Then, a new age will begin, after Christ destroys all God’s enemies – even the last enemy – death itself.

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him

who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.²²

After hell ends, then there will be a new heaven and a new earth because the old order of things will have passed away.²³ Hell is *aionios* in both major senses in which the term is used in the Bible. It is *from God*, the perpetual one, who had no beginning and will have no end. Hell is also *permanent*, an event having a beginning, and a definitive end, and from which there will be no deliverance.

God is perpetual. He never had a beginning, and will never have an end. Human beings have a beginning. We are not infinite. God in his grace offers eternal life to those who believe in his Son. We have the opportunity to become perpetual. By trusting in Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we take hold of his promise of eternal life. He intends to keep that promise by granting us immortality at his return.

He has not promised immortality to unbelievers. Their fate is to be destroyed permanently in hell. To make hell an endless process requires that unbelievers as well have immortality. That is not honouring to God nor is it taught in the scriptures.

The title of Allen's post is "Is Hell

Really Endless." The word *endless* only appears once in the Bible, and refers to teachings "which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." The Bible never uses the term *endless* to describe hell. Instead, the Bible says:

- "Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for **a full and sudden end** he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth."²⁵
- "And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but **is coming to an end.**"²⁶
- "But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? **The end of those things is death.**"²⁷
- "**Then comes the end**, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father **after destroying every rule and every authority and power.**"²⁸
- "So it is no surprise if his

servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. **Their end** will correspond to their deeds.”²⁹

- **“Their end is destruction,** their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”³⁰
- **“The end of all things is at hand;** therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.”³¹

The only permanent things in this universe are events that happen in history, God himself and the beings he has decided to rescue from this age into the next. Hell will not be perpetual, like God’s life. It will be a permanent event in history, but not a perpetual process. ■

References

¹All quotes not otherwise references are from Allen’s post.

²This is not a term we often use or appreciate. The term most of us use is conditionalist, because we argue that human immortality is conditional. Since the unsaved will not be made immortal, they cannot exist forever in a burning hell.

³Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:17, 30; Luke 10:25; 18:18, 30; John 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2, 3; Acts 13:46, 48; Romans 2:7; 5:21; 6:22, 23; Galatians 6:8; 1 Timothy 1:16; 6:2; Titus 1:2; 3:7; Hebrews 9:15; 1 John 2:25; 5:11; Jude 21.

⁴ 2 Peter 2:9 NET: “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials, and to reserve the unrighteous for punishment at the day of judgment.”

⁵Isa. 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 1:15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5; Acts 2:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Thess. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:10.

⁶Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:36; 2 Pet. 2:9; 3:7; 1 John 4:17.

⁷Romans 16:26; 1 Timothy 6:16; Hebrews 9:14;

⁸Revelation 14:6.

⁹Matthew 18:8; 25:41; Jude 7.

¹⁰2 Corinthians 4:18 “the things that are unseen are eternal.”

¹¹Romans 16:25.

¹²2 Timothy 1:9.

¹³Titus 1:2.

¹⁴Psalms 30:5.

¹⁵1 Timothy 6:16.

¹⁶Matt. 10:28; 22:7; Luke 17: 27, 29; 20:16; 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:13; 15:24, 26; Heb. 10:39; 2 Peter 2:12;

Rev. 11:18.

¹⁷Psalms 104:35; Ezekiel 26:21; 27:36; 28:19.

¹⁸Romans 6:23.

¹⁹Matthew 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28.

²⁰Revelation 21:8.

²¹Matthew 10:28.

²²1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

²³Revelation 21:1-4.

²⁴1 Timothy 1:4.

²⁵Zephaniah 1:18.

What Happens when we die: Part One

By Armand Newrick

(This is the first part of a message that was preached at Hamilton Church of Christ, New Zealand, on the 3rd April 2011. The full audio version and text is available on the website. We will be publishing more in the series.)

Introduction

With all the excitement of Easter coming some may wonder why I have to bring up such a morbid subject as “death” over these next 3 weeks. Well somebody had suggested last year that perhaps a series on this subject might be a good idea. It’s nice to have someone else suggest this because if I say anything that might upset someone I can simply blame it on that person who first suggested it.

I certainly do not expect that everyone will agree with me on my particular view of death which holds that the dead enter into an unconscious state of non-existence until Jesus Christ returns to resurrect them. You are welcome to disagree with me. In fact I know two families, who had prematurely lost a son, who became quite angry with me for challenging (quite unaware) the comfort they had found in the belief that their son continued, immediately following death, in a conscious and present state with Jesus Christ

in heaven. To suggest that their son was actually dead in the grave was offensive – I can understand this; I’m not unsympathetic to human grief due to doctrinal correctness overpowering love and compassion. However, I do ask that you might give me some grace to present this view that, in the words of Dr. Brian Smith, the former principle Emeritus of the NZ Baptist College said, is the view that makes the most sense of all the Biblical data.

Is this Subject really that Important that it has to be talked about?

Is this subject really an important one to talk about as people can become quite offended and polarized over it – do people die and go straight to heaven or are they in state of non-existence (apart from being retained in the memory of God) awaiting a resurrection back to life?

I believe the subject is important otherwise I would not have agreed to speak on it and I will try to explain why. On a number of occasions Christians who have not held my view on death have justified our differences by saying; whether

asleep until Jesus Christ returns, or immediately conscious and present with Christ after death, one's first thought following death will be of being in Christ's presence with no awareness of the passage of time; so what does it matter? This is a valid point only between the saved; "we'll all be with Christ sooner or later!"

However, and this is somewhat remiss of evangelical Christians who reason this way. The implications of either view have an enormous impact on somebody who has not and will not receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour! Are the unsaved asleep in the grave with no awareness of the passage of time prior to the resurrection or are they in a traditional place of hell in fiery relentless torments where every minute matters on the pain scale while Christians say, between you and I, as the saved, this issue doesn't really matter.

Weighing up all the Evidence

The question of what happens when we die is fundamentally a question of how God has made us as creatures. It is not good enough to draw on a select handful of NT passages that appears to match up with what may be more an inherited tradition than a well researched anthropology from the pages of the whole Bible and ar-

gue that these few verses settle it. "You know; 1, 2, 3 that settles it for me."

To be content to allow such a serious topic to rest on simply finding select verses, that say what we might have already been conditioned to believe, might be like opening the Edmonds Cook Book determined to prove that it is about teaspoons by finding a select number of references to prove it – we need to test our beliefs on this subject more thoroughly than this!



Starting with the OT

Interestingly, although the NT spans only the period of the first century AD, the OT, which spans from creation to the beginning of the 4th century BC; with a prophetic outlook to the New Heavens and Earth, is seldom consulted by those who argue that death results in an immediate conscious afterlife. In arguing for my view, the OT is fundamental for laying down a foundational understanding for how God created human beings, and in so doing, determin-

ing whether we do actually have some sort of intrinsic capacity for conscious immortality beyond natural death, before examining the 1st century AD NT documents.

The Creation of the First Human Being

We read in Genesis 1:24-31 that on the sixth day God created mankind in His own image. That "image" is defined in 1:26 as being created as vice-regents to fulfil the special task of taking dominion over the earth. There is no indication that such a rule would ever be subject to death until God introduced the command to not eat from the tree of life in Gen 2:17; or they would surely die!

Are we to assume that to "surely die" would be understood by Adam and Eve to mean that their bodies of dust would return to the ground yet their "souls" or "spirits" would leave their bodies unscathed to go to an even better place, heaven, to be with God? Some punishment that would be! Is this what the word "death" might most logically mean in 2:17? If anyone is prepared to look at the 174 OT references to the word "dead"; 227 references to "death"; 266 references to "die", as totalled up in my Strong's concordance, and you find one single reference to suggest that death means that a person leaves their body as a

spirit or soul be sure to let me know.

If we do believe that being created in God's "image" means that we humans have some sort of immortal "soul" or "spirit" that leaves the body at death why then would God want Adam and Eve in heaven with Him eternally in Sin? Are the wages of sin heaven?

If this is not the case then maybe God has sent Adam and Eve and every sinner, prior to Christ (which they all would have been), immediately into a traditional place of hell to be tortured. I guess that they might still be there now?

Or maybe when God said they would surely die (as in 2:17) he meant that the whole person ceased to exist as a result of sin. In other words Sin is that serious before a Holy God, who alone has immortality (1 Tim 6:16), that he would uncreate the human being who he had originally created to be his vice-regents over the earth.

The Bible does tell us in Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 "The dead no nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never

again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun.”

Sure, you may say, but isn't there something in us; a "soul" or "spirit", that survives death and therefore perhaps Ecclesiastes is only talking about a mortal body?

God Breathed into the Body of Dust the Breath of Life

In Genesis 2:7 many Christians have traditionally assumed that man is comprised of 3 or 2 parts; a body, spirit and soul and one of these must be immortal after all the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition states unequivocally in the Westminster Confession CF XXXIV, 1 (34.1) that souls have an immortal subsistence apart from the body. This is simply not so!

God formed the first man Adam from the dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. This term "breath of life" is a translation from the Hebrew word ruach which is variously translated as breath, wind or spirit. The word is used some 389 times throughout the OT; 224 times in the AV as "spirit" and elsewhere as wind or breath as in Gen 2:7.

It is generally used to speak of the animating principle of all creaturely life. We read in Job 34:14-15 "If it were his [God's] intention and he withdrew his spirit and

breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust."

Similarly in Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath [spirit]; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

Perhaps both Solomon and Job do not reflect the consensus of all the 389 OT references to spirit ruach; well they do! Nowhere in any of these references to "spirit" is it a word that is used to suggest some form of spiritual subsistence to the body that lives on as a conscious entity beyond death! ■ (continued in Iss 50)



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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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.