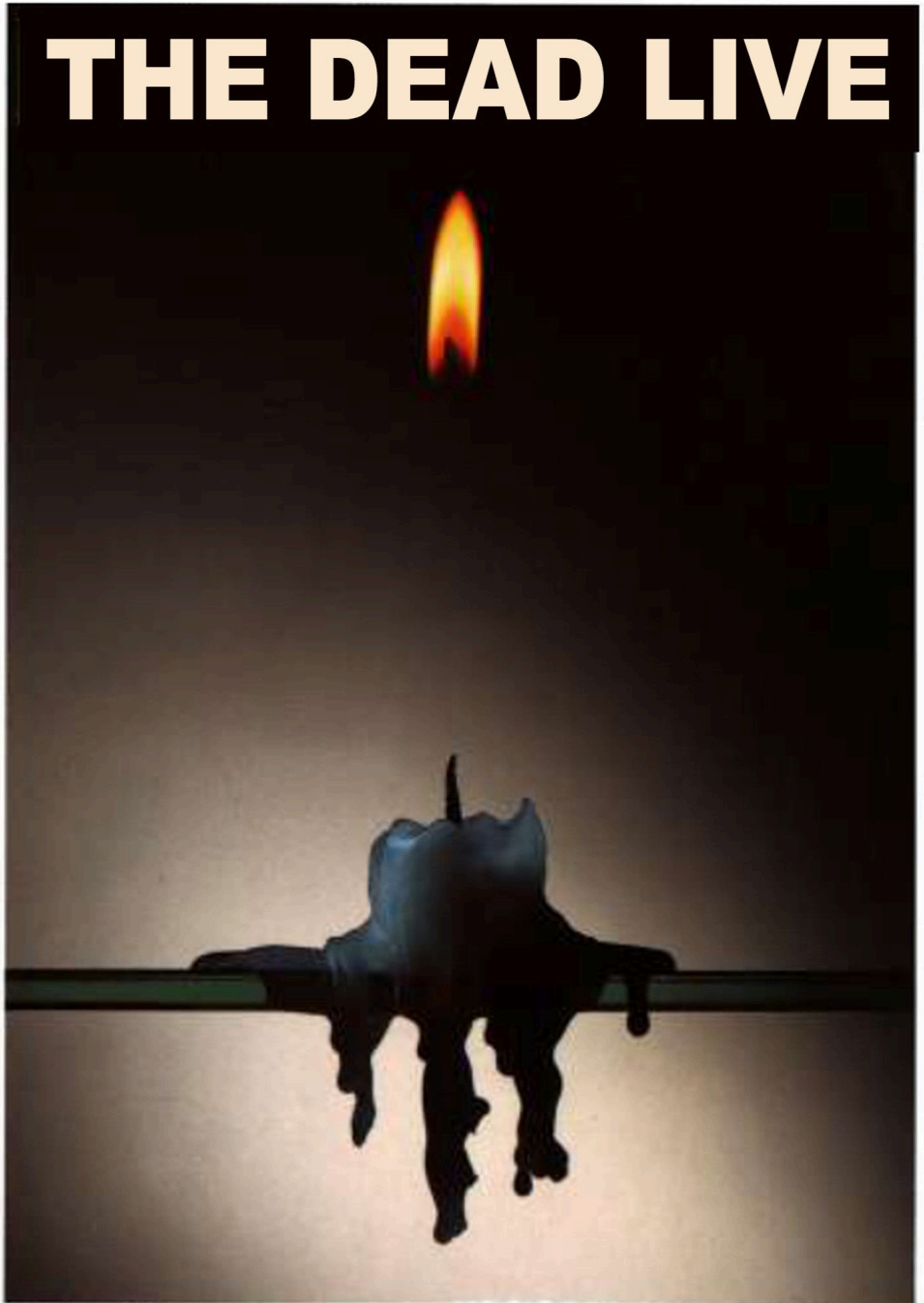


AND YET THE DEAD LIVE

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf



The Immortality of the Soul

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Contents

Preface

1 Introduction	12
1.1 The Significance and Scope of the Topic	13
1.2 Occasion and Challenge	14
1.3 Structure and Outline	15
1.4 The Order of Future Events – the Prophetic Calendar	15
1.5 The Revelation of the Bible in the Old and New Testaments	17
1.5.1 The Revelation of the New Testament	18
1.5.2 The Revelation of the Old Testament	19
1.5.3 Light in the Old Testament Too	20
1.6 The Origin and Effect of Death	22
1.7 What Happens When We Die?	24
1.7.1 The Human Spirit and Death	24
1.7.2 The Soul in Dying	25
1.7.3 Spirit and Soul	26
1.8 Different Aspects of Death	27
1.9 The Victory over Death	27
1.9.1 Death and Sin	27
1.9.2 Death and the Devil	30
2 What Comes after Death?	32
2.1 Lazarus and the Rich Man	32
2.1.1 Is This Really about Life after Death?	33
2.1.2 The Point of the Story	34
2.1.3 A Parable?	34
2.1.4 Before Death	35
2.1.5 Jewish Ideas of the Hereafter	36
2.1.6 Abraham's Bosom	37
2.1.7 How Did Lazarus Come to Abraham's Bosom?	37
2.1.8 Hades	38
2.1.9 Hades in Luke 16	41

2.1.10 Sheol	42
2.1.11 Lifting Up His Eyes	44
2.1.12 Far Off	45
2.1.13 The Great Chasm	45
2.2 The God of the Living	47
2.2.1 The Sadducees	
2.2.2 Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration	49
2.2.3 The Connection between Life after Death and the Resurrection	50
2.2.4 The Image of the Seed	51
2.3 The Criminal on the Cross	51
2.3.1 Paradise	52
2.3.2 Paradise in Jewish Tradition	53
2.3.3 Paradise in the New Testament	54
2.3.4 Is Another Interpretation of Luke 23:43 Possible?	57
2.4 Eternal Glory – Hope in the Face of Death	59
2.4.1 The Outer Man	61
2.4.2 The Inner Man	61
2.4.3 The Earthly Tent	62
2.4.4 Being Clothed	64
2.4.5 The Journey and the Home	66
2.4.6 Other Interpretations	69
2.5 To Die Is Gain	70
2.5.1 Other Explanations	73
2.5.1.1 Is It the Return of Christ?	73
2.5.1.2 Departing	73
2.5.1.3 Soul Sleep?	74
2.5.1.4 A Privilege Only for Paul?	74
2.5.2 Meeting Him!	74
2.6 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep	75
2.6.1 Are Those Who Have Fallen Asleep in Soul Sleep?	76
2.6.2 What Does the Sleep Refer To?	77
2.6.3 The Example of Stephen's Death	78
2.6.4 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep at the Rapture	78

2.6.5 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep before the Rapture	79
2.6.6 Conclusion	80
2.7 Christ – Ruler over the Living and the Dead	80
2.8 The Souls under the Altar	84
2.8.1 The Souls of the Martyrs	84
2.8.2 Under the Altar	86
2.8.3 When Does This Event Take Place?	88
2.8.4 The Cry for Vengeance	88
2.9 Eternal Life	89
2.9.1 What Is Eternal Life?	90
2.9.2 Eternal Life and Immortality	91
2.9.3 How Can a Person Receive the Life of God?	92
2.9.4 How Do Believers Possess Eternal Life?	92
2.9.5 Eternal Life and Death	93
2.9.6 Believers Who Have Died	94
2.9.7 Believers Who Are Alive	94
2.9.8 The Future Form of Eternal Life	95
2.9.9 The Holy Spirit	96
2.9.10 Conclusion	96
2.10 The Spirits in Prison	97
2.10.1 Peter’s Purpose	98
2.10.2 My Explanation of the Text	98
2.10.3 Put to Death in the Flesh – Made Alive by the Spirit	99
2.10.4 The Preaching to the Spirits in Prison	100
2.10.5 The Content of the Preaching	100
2.10.6 Souls and Spirits	102
2.10.7 Are the Spirits Fallen Angels?	102
2.10.8 Spirits – People Who Have Died	103
2.10.9 The Prison	105
2.10.10 The Release of Old Testament Believers from Sheol?	105
2.10.11 Did Jesus Descend into Hell?	107
2.10.12 Conclusion	107
2.11 Death Experiences and Near-Death Experiences	108

2.11.1 Is There Anything to These Reports?	110
2.11.2 Death Experiences in the Bible?	110
2.11.3 The Apostles Paul and John	112
2.11.4 Death Experiences – Heaven and Hell	113
2.11.5 The Deception of Darkness	114
2.11.6 Those Who Consult the Dead Are an Abomination to the Lord	115
2.11.7 Saul and Samuel	116
2.11.8 Antichristian Deception in the End Times	117
2.11.9 Conclusion	
3 The Biblical View of Man	120
3.1 What Does a Human Being Consist Of?	121
3.2 The Human Spirit	123
3.2.1 The Breath of Life	123
3.2.2 The Spirit from God and the Human Spirit	124
3.2.3 Summary	126
3.3 The Human Soul	127
3.3.1 Summary	129
3.4 The Human Body	129
3.5 Conclusion	131
4 The Immortality of the Soul	132
4.1 Eternal Life and the Immortality of the Soul	133
4.2 Immortality in the New Testament	134
4.3 Between Death and Resurrection	135
4.3.1 Consciousness of the Soul without the Body	135
4.3.2 Does the Soul Still Need a Body?	136
4.4 Immortality in the Bible and in Greek Philosophy	137
4.4.1 Dualism	137
4.4.2 The Resurrection	138
4.4.3 The Immortality of the Soul Is Not the Final State	139
4.4.4 Personality	139
4.5 Conclusion	140
4.6 The Significance of This Truth	141
5 The Future of the Dead	142

5.1 The Resurrection	142
5.1.1 The Resurrection in the Old Testament	144
5.1.2 The Resurrection of Life	145
5.1.3 The Body in the Resurrection	147
5.1.4 The Time of the Resurrection	149
5.1.5 The Resurrection to Judgment	152
6 Man in Eternity	155
6.1 Believers in Eternity	156
6.2 Unbelievers in Eternity	156
6.2.1 Hell (Gehenna)	158
6.2.2 The Lake of Fire	160
6.2.3 The Second Death	161
6.3 How Long Does the Punishment Last?	161
6.3.1 “Eternity” and “Eternal” in the New Testament	162
6.3.2 “Destruction”	164
6.3.3 Summary	165
6.3.4 The Righteousness and Holiness of God	166
6.3.5 The Cross of Golgotha	167
7 Appendix	170
7.1 What Does Holy Scripture Teach about Sheol and Hades?	170
7.2 Table of the Various Terms	175
8 Bibliography	177
Notes	181

Preface to the First Edition

Working through this difficult and complex subject was no easy task. What the reader now has in hand is therefore not an exhaustive treatment of the topic, as can easily be seen from the bibliography, which shows the great number of books on this subject.

This book would not have come into being in this form without the help of my friend Matthias Piel, to whom I hereby express my special thanks. I also thank Martin Heide for his assistance. Not least, I thank my wife, who had to do without me for many hours and yet never stopped encouraging me to finish this work.

May the faithful God bless this book to His glory! I am grateful to every reader for any criticism that is based on the Bible.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

Preface to the Third Edition

This book was not written for theologians. There are works for them that deal with this subject in more detail and depth. My concern – especially when one sees how much room for improvement there is in the understanding of Scripture, even in churches that are faithful to the Bible – is to put a book into the hands of believers that will acquaint them with these truths in a simple and understandable way.

In some places the original language is cited. But it is my deep conviction that with a good translation a correct understanding of the questions dealt with in this book is possible.

The title of the book, “The Immortality of the Soul,” is provocative to some Christians, in part for good reason. I would, however, like to try to examine its content in the light of biblical truth, and I come to the conclusion that it is entirely justified, provided that we understand and use it biblically.

After the 1st and 2nd editions appeared, I received a great many letters. There was a lot of approval, but just as much rejection. I have worked many points into this edition, including corrections that I have made in a number of places. I am grateful for these comments. Our knowledge is partial.

Since in this book I deal systematically with all (as I hope) the relevant passages of Scripture on the subject, it can also be regarded as a reference work. This also means that repetitions are unavoidable, since the individual chapters can be read on their own.

For this edition, too, which has become a complete revision with many additions, I am very grateful for the help and support especially of Werner Mücher, Gummersbach, and Wolfgang Klöckner, Obergünzburg / Allgäu, who added the questions for further study. They have helped to make the thoughts clearer and easier to understand.

In the course of such a work I also notice how much the spiritual foundation that was laid in my youth benefits me today. That is why I am also grateful to those who took the trouble to lay this foundation.

My prayer is that many children of God will benefit from this book and gain an even clearer view of the greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ in His victory

over death and of the blessing that has come to us from it.

Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf, Kempten im Allgäu, December 2003

1 Introduction

Is there really an existence, a continuing life after death? If so, how are we to imagine this existence? These, or questions like them, are asked again and again. God has set eternity in the human heart, and this gives people a sense that death is not the end:

“He has made everything beautiful in its time; he has also set eternity in their hearts, yet no one can grasp the work that God has done from beginning to end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Even if this word does not in itself mean that the heart – in the Bible the innermost and essential part of a person – is designed for eternity, it at least says that human beings sense – as all world religions and tribal religions, ancient and modern, confirm – that there is something beyond the horizon of our knowledge, namely a life after this life. The Creator Himself has given human beings an awareness of His timelessness.¹

In the same breath, however, this word of the Preacher names the limit of knowledge. *Under the sun* there is no knowledge about death and the future. For the Preacher, “*under the sun*” is a view of the world from the perspective of a person who does not know God’s revelation. And thank God, through the Bible we have God’s revelation in our hands. It comes from the God who is above the sun, to continue the Preacher’s language.

People try to answer this ultimate question with every available discipline of science and pseudoscience. Although the limit of knowledge cannot be removed, solutions are offered that interpret death and what comes after it in a way that – from a biblical point of view – is seductive and disastrous! Some say that for all people death is the passage into paradise. Others claim that after death there is nothing at all. Or it is thought that after a temporary existence there comes the final end for some and eternal life for others.

These explanations are disastrous because they lead people astray and do not understand death as what it really is: the wages of sin (Romans 6:23) and

1. This does not change even if this awareness often takes very different forms and many deny a life after death.

separation from God.

What do we Christians have to say about this? Do we base our view on this question on the Word of God, and are we ready and able to give an account of the hope (1 Peter 3:15)² that we have in our hearts?

We do not need to hide, nor may we, for among all the attempts around us to interpret death, it will become clear again and again that the biblical view of death and what comes after – and thus of the future of humanity – is unique. Nowhere else is there such a magnificent hope and such a wonderful future. There are, however, two destinations, which lie at the end of a broad way and of a narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14).

1.1 The Significance and Scope of the Topic

The subject of this book deals with questions at the very limits of human knowledge in the realm of life and death. We are entirely dependent on what God tells us in His Word about this subject. Even though the Bible has essential things to say about these matters, we must not overemphasize this topic and give it a weight that Scripture does not give it. So we want to say neither too much nor too little about it. Where Scripture is silent, we too want to be silent! The Bible says a great deal about the future – but relatively little about the time between death and resurrection, since this is only an intermediate phase that will one day be ended forever.

At first glance, life between death and resurrection does not seem to have anything directly to do with the foundations of the faith (e.g., the person and work of Jesus Christ, the inspiration of the Bible). That someone is convinced that after death he sinks into an unconscious sleep until the resurrection may perhaps not be a heresy.³ But if – and this is often the case – the conclusion is drawn from it that in eternity there is also this unconscious state, or an end of existence, such as the annihilation of the ungodly, then the foundations of the Christian faith are under attack.

Then, as we will see, the very nature of God – His love, holiness and righteousness – is also at stake. Some readers may perhaps be surprised at this

2. Our hope is not exhausted in a life after death. The time between death and resurrection is “only” a temporary matter. Our hope and future is eternal life in the resurrection.

3. I consider this view a false teaching that, taken by itself, may not have great consequences; but the step to heresy – that is, a teaching that leads people astray and into ruin (Deuteronomy 27:18; Ezekiel 13:10) – is very close, and not a few have taken it.

connection. But what is really at issue is the validity and the effects of the work of redemption of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In a comprehensive treatment of this subject, namely the future of humanity, we will see how the circle closes. It is about more than just a life between death and resurrection.

1.2 Occasion and Challenge

Some time ago I was confronted with a view that denies that the soul continues to exist after death. This conviction is found in various sects and false teachings (among others, among the Adventists⁴ and Jehovah's Witnesses⁵); it says roughly the following:

From birth, man has no immortal soul. Through sin he is subject to mortality. He obtains immortality only and exclusively through Christ. This is the eternal life that all who believe in Christ receive. Consequently, all who do not have life in Christ will not live forever, but will one day cease to exist; that is, they will be annihilated in hell, their existence will be extinguished.

Because the human soul is not immortal but mortal, there is also no life after death. In death the soul dies, the whole person perishes, every function – including those of a mental and emotional nature – is extinguished. In one variant of this view, this state of “nonexistence” is also called soul sleep, insofar as it concerns the state after death and before the resurrection. During this soul sleep there is no consciousness.⁶

In this view, the human being is seen as an indivisible unity. Either a person is alive (in the body), or he is dead. There is no intermediate state between these two forms of existence. Man, created as a unity, will only regain consciousness in the resurrection. In this view, there is no soul and no spirit without or outside the body.

I am not concerned here with a debate with the atheistic and materialistic view of death and the immortality of the soul. Rather, my concern is to

4. E.g., Tobler, G., *Wann beginnt das ewige Leben*, (Advent-Verlag, Zürich). Tomasi, M., *Tod und Auferstehung, Himmel und Hölle*, (Advent Verlag, Zürich). *77 Fragen an die Gemeinschaft der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten*, (Union Verlag Berlin), 1988.

5. These two sects certainly have to be assessed in a differentiated way, but on this point there are no essential differences between them; both hold a false teaching.

6. This view is known by the term “conditionalism,” though less so in the German-speaking world. The term (from Latin *conditio*, condition) means that a person's immortality depends on the condition of whether or not he possesses life in Christ.

respond to a view that is defended on the basis of the Bible.

This book, however, is intended not only for those who are dealing with the specific problem of conditionalism or soul sleep, but for all who want to engage with this subject in a more fundamental way.

1.3 Structure and Outline

First of all, it is necessary to arrive at a balanced assessment of what the Bible says about our subject: How did the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament think about the things of the hereafter?

Next, death must be examined with regard to its origin and how it works. Special attention will then be given to the victory over death by our Lord Jesus Christ.

After this groundwork, I will deal with what comes immediately after death. In doing so, I will draw on all the essential passages of the New Testament that say something about it. These passages are the most important part for the actual topic, because here the time between death and resurrection is addressed directly by various writers. One writer only touches on the subject, another deals with it concretely. There can be no talk of too few passages.

This in turn borders on the question of what man actually is. In particular, it concerns the nature and immortality of the soul. That is also where the root lies of the views on which conditionalism is based. Since the intermediate state after death is only temporary, we then come to the great event that ends this state: the resurrection. In a further chapter I will deal with the eternal state, examining in particular the fate of the ungodly. Again and again the question arises whether – in view of the love of God – there can really be an eternal hell.

1.4 The Order of Future Events – the Prophetic Calendar

No matter which book on this subject one reads, all books are based on a particular view of eschatology, the doctrine of future events. This book is no different. I would like to make clear at the outset my conviction about the order of prophetic events and their main emphases, in order to give the reader a

better understanding of how things fit together. In a few words and without further justification at this point, I will state my conviction.⁷

I believe that all Christians, all children of God, will very soon be caught up to Jesus Christ in heaven. At that time all believers who have died up to then will rise and be caught up together with the living. Then a time of great judgments will come, in which the Antichrist will appear and lead many people astray. The focal point of God's salvation history will then be above all the land and people of Israel. God, Yahweh, will fulfill all the promises He has given to His ancient people Israel. Then Christ (Hebrew: *Messiah*) will appear for the judgment of the living and establish His kingdom. It is not Christians who will build this kingdom of power and glory, but Christ, when He comes to reign. After this kingdom there will once more be a great deception by Satan. Only then comes the final judgment of all people, which is generally called the "last day." Then the earth and the heavens will be dissolved and created anew.

A different understanding of prophetic chronology, however, does not necessarily mean that one comes to different conclusions on all points that concern our subject. On the topic of the resurrection, for example, there is broad agreement about its nature, but not about its timing or about whether there will be one resurrection or several.

The accompanying chart shows the order of the resurrections and judgments. I ask the reader to look up the Bible passages cited.

- Hell¹¹ · New heaven and new earth¹⁰ · The Father's house¹²
- **The eternal state**⁹
- ☐ Judgment of the **dead** before the great white throne at the end of the age⁸
- ▲ Resurrection of all the unrighteous to judgment after the Millennium, before the great white throne⁷
- ▲ **1st resurrection**, stage B⁵: martyrs from the Tribulation
- ☐ Appearing of Christ for the judgment of the **living** at the beginning of the Millennium on earth⁶
- ☐ Judgment seat of Christ for the glorified believers in heaven⁴

7. A detailed discussion of the various views can be found, among others, in the introduction to the commentary on Revelation: W.J. Ouweeneel, *Das Buch der Offenbarung*, Bielefeld (CLV) 1995, and: J.D. Pentecost, *Bibel und Zukunft*, Dillenburg (CVD) 1993.

- **▲ 1st resurrection**, stage A²: Rapture of the church into heaven y³
- **Death and resurrection of Jesus Christ**¹

□ = judgment · ∴ = time · ▲ = resurrection

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:1-23; Acts 17:31; ² + ³ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54; ⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:13-15; 4:4-5; ⁵ Revelation 20:4-6; ⁶ Matthew 25:31-46; ⁷ Revelation 20:5; John 5:29; Job 14:10-12; ⁸ Revelation 20:11-15; 1 Corinthians 15:24; ⁹ 2 Peter 3:13; 1 Corinthians 15:24; ¹⁰ Revelation 21:1-8; ¹¹ Matthew 18:8; Jude 7, 13; Revelation 14:11; 20:10; ¹² John 14:2-3; 17:24; 1 Thessalonians 4:17

1.5 The Revelation of the Bible in the Old and New Testaments

If one examines the whole of Holy Scripture with the question of what the state of man is like after death and in eternity, great differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament become apparent. The essential difference lies in the degree of revelation, that is, in the extent to which God has spoken about these things in the Old Testament on the one hand and in the New Testament on the other. Only the New Testament answers the question of the hereafter and of human immortality comprehensively and conclusively.

This does not mean that one finds little about this subject in the Old Testament. No, there are actually more statements about death and Sheol in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. But the statements of people in the Old Testament are often marked by uncertainty and ignorance about death, also by doubts, and even by fear. This is because very little about life after death had been revealed to these people, and they did not have the certainty of peace with God and of an eternal redemption.

Among the believers of the New Testament, by contrast, we find a completely different attitude. Death is no longer for them what it was for many Old Testament believers. For them this uncertainty and ignorance no longer exist, nor doubt or fear. Just compare the statements of Job with those of the apostle Paul.

Job said: "... before I go – and I shall not return – to the land of darkness and the shadow of death, to the land gloomy as darkness itself, the land of the shadow of

death and of disorder, where even the light is like darkness!” (Job 10:21).⁸

Paul, however, could say: “... whether the world or life or death or things present or things to come – all are yours” (1 Corinthians 3:22).⁹

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers’ attitude toward death has fundamentally changed. Christians know the victory over death and the Victor over it. This victory becomes effective not only in the resurrection, but also in the state immediately after death.

1.5.1 The Revelation of the New Testament

Why does the New Testament reveal more to us about the hereafter? Because through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death has been defeated and abolished, and with this a radical upheaval has taken place that in its scope changes everything. This upheaval is the message of the gospel:

“... who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and the grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and incorruptibility [or: imperishability] to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:9-10).

Luke put it similarly in the book of Acts:

“... that the Christ must suffer, that by being the first to rise from the dead he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:23).

The writers of the Old Testament searched for clarity about things that could only come as a result of the work of Jesus Christ. For them, death had – at least subjectively – not yet been abolished by the work of Christ.¹⁰ They looked at death before life and incorruptibility had been brought to light. It was not only a question of revelation, for it would have been a small thing for God to lift the veil. It was a matter of the revelation of these things in connection with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

8. See also Job 14:12; 30:23; 38:17.

9. See also Philippians 1:23; 1 Corinthians 15:54-56; 2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10.

10. Nevertheless, all believers of the old covenant went after their death into the heavenly paradise, as we will see later. This was not known to them before their death, that is, it had not been revealed.

The full revelation of the things of the hereafter had to wait for the coming of the Son of God. Before that there were only a few promises or revelations about the things of the hereafter, compared with what we know today, after the coming of the Lord Jesus, through the writings of the New Testament (John 3:11-13; Ephesians 1:3ff.; Philippians 3:20).

1.5.2 The Revelation of the Old Testament

In the Old Testament we find a wide variety of writers and thus also different kinds of text¹¹. There are the historical books, which document God's ways with His people. Then there are the prophetic books, in which God spoke through His prophets about the moral condition of His people and of other nations, and about their future.

In addition there are also poetic books such as Job, the Psalms and Ecclesiastes, which express human thoughts, feelings and emotions in a special way.¹² In the last three books mentioned we find most of the statements that interest us in connection with our subject.

The Preacher sometimes tries to explain the meaning of life and of the world from a purely horizontal perspective: his horizon does not extend beyond what he sees "under the sun" (1:3; 2:11, 18, 22). One of his answers to the question of meaning is:

"For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same: as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. Who knows whether the breath of the children of man goes upward and the breath of the beasts goes down into the earth?" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21).

The Preacher comes to conclusions that are true only from a this-worldly perspective. That is why this book must not become a chief witness concerning the things of the hereafter, let alone concerning eternal things. In the Psalms we find some statements that are very similar to those of the Preacher (e.g., Psalm 49:12; 103:15-16). These statements, too, do not give us final insight into the

11. Historical writing, poetry, proverbs, etc.

12. When I say here that these books contain human thoughts, they are nevertheless, like all the other books of the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit and recorded for us with a divine purpose.

hereafter.¹³

If one looks at the Old Testament in isolation from the New Testament, one may get the impression that one is dealing with contradictions. But this impression can only arise if one forgets that the things of the hereafter were only partially revealed in Old Testament times. An argument in which the statements of the Old Testament are the strongest arguments cannot present the whole truth.

1.5.3 Light in the Old Testament Too

But this does not mean that there was no light at all with regard to our subject. Even the Old Testament gives us enough indications that not everything is over with death.

- “Gathered to his people.”¹⁴ As a rule, “being gathered” – in our ordinary usage too – means bringing several persons together in one place in a matter that concerns all who are present. When this expression is also used for dying, there is at least a hint in it that the dead are brought together in one place, or in the realm of the dead – in the Old Testament, Sheol.¹⁵ It is striking that the burial or interment is distinguished from “being gathered.”¹⁶ So already at the beginning of history there are terms that have to do with the hereafter.
- The medium at Endor and the spirit of Samuel (1 Samuel 28). In Israel it was assumed that those who consulted the dead could bring up the spirit of a dead person. This presupposes that the spirit of the dead person had to exist somehow and somewhere – or at least it was assumed that these spirits of the dead existed. Apart from that, God had forbidden, on pain of the severest penalty, consulting the spirits of the dead through occult mediums.¹⁷

13. The Psalms have a different character. To a large extent they are prophetic in nature. What is special about them is that these prophecies are very often expressed in the thoughts and feelings of people. The sufferings of which David speaks, for example, take on a form under the guidance of the Spirit of God that could ultimately be fulfilled only in the sufferings of Christ.

14. Genesis 25:8, 17; 35:28-29; see also Genesis 37:35; Judges 2:10.

15. Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:31; Numbers 16:30; 1 Samuel 2:6.

16. Genesis 35:29; 2 Kings 22:20; 2 Chronicles 34:28.

17. Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:11.

- The taking up of Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and of Elijah (2 Kings 2). Although what happened to these persons is an exception, we may still ask the question: where were these persons after their ascension?¹⁸ Elijah and Moses – Moses died a natural death – both appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration and talked with Jesus.¹⁹
- David and his dead child (2 Samuel 12:23). David said: “But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.”

The fellowship of believers with God and their trust in God is not interrupted even in their death. Alongside the statements in which fear of death is expressed, there are also some in which we find confidence, peace and expectation: Psalm 16:9-11; 17:6; 31:5; 49:14-15; 73:24-26; 116:15.

In summary, we note that the Old Testament gives us information about the hereafter only to a certain degree. If we were therefore to try to derive definitive statements about life after death from it, we would obscure the light that is found on this in the New Testament. Only if we examine the statements of the Old Testament on the basis of the New Testament and interpret them in its light will we understand them rightly. The New Testament is always the key to the Old Testament, not the other way around.

What is said in the following verse about salvation could, in essence, also apply to the future of man. The prophets saw and wrote many things, but it was a matter of searching and inquiring; full knowledge was not granted to them:

“... a salvation about which the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he testified beforehand about the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Peter 1:10-11).

The relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament on this question could be illustrated by a principle from the German Basic Law, Article 31: “Federal law overrides state law”; that is, federal law takes precedence when provisions on the same matter have different content.

Questions for Further Study

18. Cf. section 2.2.

19. Matthew 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30.

- Summarize what was revealed in the Old Testament about a “life after death”!
- What is the difference in revelation between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
- Why can the Old Testament not be used as the basis for the doctrine of the future of man?

1.6 The Origin and Effect of Death

From the hand of the eternal God,²⁰ who alone possesses immortality,²¹ had come forth a creation in which nothing could have been better or more beautiful (Genesis 1:31; Ecclesiastes 3:11). Man, created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27; James 3:9) and thus the center of the visible creation, was destined to live in fellowship with his Creator. He lived in a wonderful garden, the most favorable surroundings for fulfilling this destiny. In the middle of the garden stood the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, 16; 3:22). Life in its power and variety characterized creation. Life – and that without any time limit – was the highest thing God had given man. He was free to eat at any time from the fruit of the tree of life. From the beginning man was designed for a life without end. Only this corresponded to the nature and will of God.

All the more striking, then, is the threat of death in the event that man should step out of dependence on and fellowship with his Creator through disobedience (Genesis 2:17). In this sphere that was pulsing with life, the threat of death was the most terrible warning there could be. For man, death meant that he would have to leave the creation visible to him – that is, its earthly realm – and with it also the Creator whom he had known within this (visible) creation. He had been formed from dust (Genesis 2:7), and to dust he would return:

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the earth [lit. to the ground], for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return!”
(Genesis 3:19).

20. “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Psalm 90:2). “... according to the command of the eternal God” (Romans 16:26).

21. “... which he will display at the proper time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings [lit. of those who are kings] and Lord of lords [lit. of those who rule], who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

Man, created for life, would perish and lose his earthly life, become as insignificant as dust. Could the contrast be any greater?!

Through the deception of the serpent, the devil, man chose disobedience and with it death (Genesis 3:1-7). Sin opened the door for death to begin its terrible work in this creation (Romans 5:12ff.). Death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). It is the terrible consequence of falling away from God. This is the basic statement of the Bible about death. Sin is the cause and death the inevitable consequence. Through sin man steps out of dependence on God and thereby leaves the One who has life and gives it.²²

Death is therefore neither a natural nor a merciful end of life. There is nothing good about death. Death ends the life that man does not want to give up. It is final and irrevocable, irreversible. That man cannot be brought back from death (2 Samuel 12:23; 14:14) is the terrible fate of the human being who has become a sinner. With these grim prospects the course of history begins. The whole creation came under the sentence of death and transience. But there is hope, for the offspring of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent and so open the way to the liberation of the whole creation (Genesis 3:15):

“For the eager longing of the creation waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility [or: transience, vanity] (not willingly, but because of him who subjected it), in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now” (Romans 8:19-22).

Death broke into creation as something contrary to nature – as an enemy that cannot be defeated by human beings and that does its work cruelly and mercilessly. That is also how people generally experience death. The person who lives without God suffers from the fear of death, because he does not know what lies ahead of him, and he is also accused by his conscience, which condemns him and fills him with fear of the living God (Hebrews 2:15).

After Adam and Eve had sinned, God clothed them with garments of skins (Genesis 3:21) to cover their nakedness. For the first time they were confronted with death. An animal had to die to make this clothing. Far more terrible still

22. John 1:4; see also Proverbs 14:27; 19:23.

for them was the moment they looked at their dead son, who had been murdered by his brother (Genesis 4:8). Death reveals itself as a destructive and invincible enemy. Unstoppably it begins its triumphal march (Hosea 13:14; 1 Corinthians 15:54). Even though Adam lived a very long time (Genesis 5:5), it nevertheless proved true that he had to die and become dust.

Questions for Further Study

- Where does death come from?
- What has death brought about?

1.7 What Happens When We Die?

Here we are dealing with physical death, which, as a consequence of sin, puts an end to man's earthly life. But what happens at death? We have already indicated that death brings about a separation and tears apart what belongs together. Death is the end of a unity, namely the wholeness of the human being.

Although man is a unity, there are many aspects that make up his existence. In connection with death, the spirit, the soul and the body are spoken of.²³ Death brings about the separation of the body from the spirit and the soul, the separation of the inner man from the outer man (2 Corinthians 4:16ff.). God's Word testifies to this in many places.²⁴

1.7.1 The Human Spirit and Death

At a person's death, the human spirit returns to God, who gave it. Even the Preacher says this, though he answers many questions from a this-worldly perspective:

"... and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Luke also mentions this in his account of the raising of Jairus's daughter:

"But he [Jesus], taking her by the hand, called, saying, 'Child, arise.' And her spirit returned, and she got up at once. And he directed that something should be given her to

23. See the detailed discussion in chapter 3.

24. My concern at this point is not to view man as a two-part or three-part being. The terms *spirit* and *soul* are often used interchangeably. What is important is that they are the part of man that outlasts death and preserves the human personality beyond death. The human heart, too, occupies an equally important place in Scripture when it comes to the nature of man.

eat” (Luke 8:54-55).

The spirit of the girl, which had left her when death occurred, returned. When a person dies, the spirit leaves the body (Psalm 146:4). James says the same: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

When man was created, God gave him the spirit (Genesis 2:7). When a person dies, God takes the spirit back:

“Thus declares the LORD, who stretched out the heavens and founded the earth and formed the spirit of man within him” (Zechariah 12:1).

“When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your breath [lit. breath (or: Spirit)], they are created, and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:29-30).

Dying is the reception of the spirit into the hands of God (Psalm 31:5). The Lord Jesus Christ also said this when He died on the cross. The Gospel writers mention it explicitly:²⁵

Matthew: “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (Matthew 27:50).

Luke: “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46).

John: “When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30).

As the Creator, He breathed the breath of life into man at the beginning; but on the cross, because He was fully and completely man, He gave His spirit into the hands of His Father (Psalm 31:5). He was man in spirit (Mark 8:12), soul (Mark 14:34) and body, in which He suffered and died.

As he was dying, Stephen prayed: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (Acts 7:59).

1.7.2 The Soul in Dying

When Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, her soul departed (Genesis 35:18). Elijah prayed that the soul of the dead boy of the widow of Zarephath might

25. Jesus gave up His spirit; that is, He Himself determined the moment of this surrender. In this He is unique. He had the authority to lay down His life (John 10:18). Man as a creature does not have this.

return: “And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came back into him, and he revived” (1 Kings 17:22).

Sometimes the Old Testament also speaks of the soul dying (e.g., Numbers 23:10; Judges 16:30). But what is meant is not the death of the soul but of the body. It is about the soul going out of the body. This becomes clear in the words of Elijah, “weary of life,” when he sat down under the broom tree and wished for nothing more than that his soul might die (1 Kings 19:4). He asked the Lord to take away his soul.

Jonah prayed that the LORD would take his soul from him, because it was better for him to die than to live (Jonah 4:3).

With Ananias and Sapphira as well as with King Herod, death occurred when they “breathed out their soul” (Acts 5:5, 10; 12:23).²⁶

God demanded from the rich farmer not only his life but also his soul (Luke 12:20).

Dying, then, is the taking away of the soul (not only of biological life!) to God, and never its dissolution or annihilation. Holy Scripture makes it clear beyond any doubt that the human soul does not perish in death but lives on.

1.7.3 Spirit and Soul

In the passages of Scripture quoted, both the spirit and the soul stand for that which leaves a person at death in order to go to another place or to exist in a “bodiless” state. The two terms “spirit” and “soul” are often used synonymously; they frequently stand for one and the same thing. Therefore, when I speak of the human spirit and soul in the further course of this book, I will combine the terms. I will use the term “spirit-soul.” This term is not found in Scripture, but it makes things easier to understand.

Questions for Further Study

- Describe what happens at death or in dying!
- Why are people afraid of death?
- Explain the connection between death and sin!
- Set out the role that the devil on the one hand and the Lord Jesus on the other play with regard to death!

26. The Greek word *ek-psycho*, which is translated “to breathe one’s last,” literally means “to out-soul.”

1.8 Different Aspects of Death

Death does not refer only to the human body. The New Testament also speaks of a spiritual death in which every person finds himself because of his sin.²⁷ Spiritual death is not the “nonexistence” of the human spirit, let alone its annihilation, but the separation of his spirit from God.

The New Testament also speaks of a “second death.”²⁸ The “first death” refers to a person’s physical death, when he leaves the visible world. For unbelievers, the second death follows after their resurrection. It is like a second dying after they have risen – one that will never end. The second death is not the final annihilation of the human being, but the final separation from God, with no return to fellowship with God.

1.9 The Victory over Death

Through man’s sin, death began its triumphal march through the world. Separated from God there is only death. Death is God’s judgment on sin. But is it God’s will that death should keep its power and that man should remain subject to spiritual, physical and ultimately eternal death? No, Scripture says:

“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3-4); and: “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23).

1.9.1 Death and Sin

In order to give life, the problem of death had to be solved. God our Savior, who sought the rescue of man, who had fallen prey to death and sin (Titus 2:11; 3:4), found a way. The eternal God (Romans 16:26), who has life in Himself (John 5:26), who is light (1 John 1:5) and love (1 John 4:8), shines in the person of Jesus Christ with the light of life (John 1:4; 8:12) into the land of death:

“The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16; quotation from Isaiah 9:2).

27. Luke 15:32; John 5:25; Ephesians 2:1-10; Colossians 2:13; 1 John 3:14; Jude 12; Revelation 3:1.

28. Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8.

Even though this passage describes the people of Israel, in principle it applies to all people. God sent His Son when the fullness of time had come (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 1:1) to defeat death. The Son of God has won the victory. After the work on the cross had been accomplished and after His resurrection, He said: “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). From these words we can see that God Himself is speaking, for these words apply only to God (Revelation 1:8; 2:8; 22:13). It is the same God who revealed Himself in the Old Testament (Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12).

As a man on earth, the Lord Jesus had power over death. He proved this by raising Lazarus (John 11), the young man of Nain (Luke 7:11-14) and the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:49-56). His raising of the dead was the proof that He is the Author of life (Acts 3:15) and therefore God Himself.

Of equally great importance as the deity of Christ is the fact that He is man. He became man in order to be able to die in the place of sinners. He died as a sacrifice for sin. He was laid in a tomb. After three days He was raised by God. In resurrection He now possesses, as man, an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16). As the risen and glorified man, He therefore has the keys of death and of Hades. The key is a picture of authority.²⁹ The man Jesus Christ has authority over death and over Hades, the realm of the dead. Death can no longer touch Him (Romans 6:9-10). That is why death can no longer harm those who are united with Him either. These are the ones who have turned to Him and possess His life, the life of the Risen One.

In order to free people from death forever, God Himself had to become man and die. In this way both the question of sin was settled and death was defeated through the resurrection. What a divine triumph!

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was the Holy One, that is, the One conceived by God the Holy Spirit Himself (Luke 1:35). Consequently there was no sin in His life (1 John 3:5), neither in words, nor in thoughts or deeds (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22). What applies to all other people therefore did not apply to Him: He did not need to die. When He died, He died voluntarily. He had authority to lay down His life, but He also had authority to take it up again from death (John 10:17-18).

29. Cf. Revelation 3:7; 9:1; 20:1; Matthew 16:19; 18:18; Isaiah 22:22.

This brings us back to the connection between death and sin. Sin brought about death. The problem of death is at the same time the problem of sin. That is why this cause had to be dealt with first. At the beginning it was mentioned that God is light, that is, that He is absolutely holy. He cannot look on sin (Habakkuk 1:13) and cannot let it go unpunished. God cannot accept the sinner with his sin and give him life without atonement being made for his sins. That is why Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), died. He bore God's wrath against sin in the place of the sinner (2 Corinthians 5:21). God's demands have been fulfilled through the death of Christ. His holiness has been perfectly satisfied.

The death of Christ, which accomplished atonement, was not the death of an ordinary man. The death of Christ was God's judgment on sin. The Holy One was made sin. He suffered for sin at the hand of God. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. God punished the guiltless One for our sins. The death that man receives as the wages of sin is therefore not only physical death, but ultimately also eternal death. The punishment that consists in eternal death, in eternal separation from God, Christ experienced on the cross in order to free us, the believers, from it forever.

When Christ rose after three days, He broke the chains of death in His own divine power. Christ is risen, sin is atoned for, and death is defeated. He has broken the power of sin and death (Romans 5:12-21). That is the center of the message of the resurrection. That is the end of the reign of death!

This victory does not mean, however, that death has already been abolished and removed from the world. Death still reigns in the world. Even believers who have the resurrection life of Christ still die. For believers, however, death has already been stripped of its power. "To abolish" means "to make ineffective" and "to render powerless." In the world death continues to reign through sin, but the believer has been set free from the power of death. For him death no longer means judgment but entrance into glory. Hebrews 2:14-15 sums up these thoughts:

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

1.9.2 Death and the Devil

What does it mean that the devil has the power of death? Can the devil kill people at will? Can he dispose of death as he pleases? That is impossible, for God holds the life of all people in His hand and takes it back when He wills. The devil cannot do that, but he has the power of death on his side as his ally. Through his cunning temptation the devil led man into sin and thereby brought him under the power of death. That was his goal.

In this way the devil gained influence over man. He became the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4) and the ruler of this age (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The power of death and darkness reigns in this world, and the devil is a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8). Once again: he has no power to kill, but he murders as a deceitful seducer by leading man away from God, the source of life. This poison of deception kills him spiritually and physically, and that forever. Every person who dies without God is his prey forever. In this sense death works for the devil and supports his corrupt purposes.

But Christ has rendered the devil powerless by entering his domain, death, and carrying off the victory through His resurrection. His death on the cross is the victory over the devil (Colossians 2:15).

The devil has not been annihilated, but he has had to accept a crushing defeat. He is still alive and still at work, as at the beginning. The end of the devil and of death, however, has already been firmly decided.

The victory of Jesus now applies only to those who are united with Christ. They are set free from the fear of death, for death is a defeated enemy for them. According to the words of the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 3:22), death now even belongs to them, in that it brings them to Christ in paradise. If it is said that for believers all things work together for good (Romans 8:28), then not even death is excluded from this.

For all who do not know the Victor over death, the fear of death can mean lifelong slavery. People's fear of death is greatest in the face of death when their conscience has awakened to their unatoned guilt and accuses them. So in the verses Hebrews 2:14-15 the writer will have been thinking especially of those who were under the bondage of the law and had no assurance of the forgiveness of their sins.

The victory of Jesus Christ has broken the bondage of death and of the fear of death. Sin, death and the devil have been defeated through the atoning death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the basis on which sin will soon be put away from the cosmos (John 1:29; Hebrews 9:26) and death, as the last enemy, will be done away with (Revelation 20:14).

“The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:26).

“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.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55; cf. Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14).

“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

He has truly done it and will complete it! Praise the Lord!

2 What Comes after Death?

Holy Scripture does not say very much about the state of man after death until the resurrection. Rather, it directs our expectation toward the day of completion. The hope of Christians is directed toward the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to lead His people into their heavenly home. In view of this blessed hope, the life between death and resurrection recedes into the background.

It cannot be otherwise, since our hope is not fulfilled with death. We do not reach our final goal through death, but only at the time of the resurrection. The intermediate state, however, is the last stage before the final goal, and that is a blessed insight that already contains a foretaste of the completion.

When it comes to life after death, we are speaking of a temporary intermediate state. The question I would like to pursue in what follows is this: What is the state of a person's consciousness after death? In doing so I will engage several times with the view that denies any consciousness after death and any hereafter in general.

I will now pursue these questions under 11 headings, examining the essential passages of Scripture in the New Testament. Each chapter is written in enough detail to be used on its own. For this reason there may be some repetition here and there.

2.1 Lazarus and the Rich Man

Many people certainly think of this well-known story first when it comes to life after death. And that is how it has always been understood. Yet there are attempts at interpretation that separate this story entirely from life after death, as if it had nothing to say about it. On the one hand I will bring out its meaning, and on the other I will also respond to false explanations.

“Now there was a certain rich man, and he dressed in purple and fine linen and lived joyfully and in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus lay at his gate, covered with sores, and he longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs came and licked his sores. Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, lifting up his eyes, being in torment, he sees Abraham far off

and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus likewise the bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are suffering agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot, and none may come over from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them urgently, lest they also come to this place of torment.' But Abraham says to him, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' And he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead'" (Luke 16:19-31; translated from the German Elberfelder Bible).

2.1.1 Is This Really about Life after Death?

The following reasons clearly show that this is about life after death:

- Most of this story – more than two-thirds of it – describes things that happen “after” the death of the two persons. There is no mention of a resurrection of the two.
- Both “Hades,” where the rich man lifts up his eyes after his death, and “Abraham’s bosom,” into which the poor man is carried after his death, refer to places or states beyond death. These terms cannot be explained in any other way.
- The Jews were familiar with these terms. In their tradition, these or similar descriptions of the hereafter were well known to them.
- The rich man was in the state of death while his brothers were still alive. The brothers exist at the same time, some on earth, the other in Hades.³⁰

Here the Son of God draws back the curtain and unveils something that until then had not been revealed in the writings of the Old Testament.

30. Accordingly, no change had taken place in the course of this world either, such as the beginning of the kingdom of God or the resurrection.

2.1.2 The Point of the Story

When we say that this story is about the state immediately after death, we are overlooking neither the context (other parables) nor the people – the Pharisees – who are directly addressed by this story. In this story Jesus portrays the ostentation and selfishness of the rich man in their appalling extent. The rich man is not portrayed as an open transgressor of the law, for that was neither his sin nor the sin of the Pharisees. Their sin, namely the love of money, was hidden under a hypocritical cloak of piety (Luke 16:14). The love of money (1 Timothy 6:10) has consequences for eternity, and these begin immediately after death. That is the theme of the story.

The Pharisees had overheard the story of the dishonest manager, which was intended for the Lord's disciples (Luke 16:1), from some

distance (Luke 16:14). Because they then ridiculed the Lord, He turned directly to them. They received a particularly solemn and unmistakable lesson. Jesus addressed them through the conduct of the rich man.

This teaching is not limited to rebuking the Pharisees' love of money. Nor is the warning exhausted by the fact that all people, rich or poor, must one day die; rather, it is directed above all to what comes afterward. The considerably larger part therefore deals with the events beyond death, especially with the fate of the rich man. The events after the death of the two do not form a meaningless framework into which a lesson about money has been set; they are the main content of this story.

2.1.3 A Parable?

Much has been said about the question of whether or not this story is a parable. Some emphasize that it is a parable which does not serve to make doctrinal statements or to reveal things that were not previously known. Nor, they say, can one interpret every detail of a parable, since it contains only one central idea. Here, they say, that idea is to rebuke the Pharisees' greed for money and the wrong use of money. That, and not life after death, is supposedly the central message.

Luke does not call this story a parable. We might perhaps have expected that of him, since he speaks of parables no fewer than eleven times in his Gospel. The strongest argument that it is not a parable is that a proper name, namely

Lazarus, is used, which is otherwise not the case in parables. The proper name – Lazarus was a well-known name (see John 11) – indicates that this is about an event that actually happened.

Why does Jesus use terms that were explicitly used for the hereafter? In doing so He met the Pharisees exactly where their ideas were, in what they believed about the hereafter; yet they did not apply the seriousness of the matter to themselves.

2.1.4 Before Death

Only the first three verses describe earthly life (Luke 16:19-21), and they contain exactly what was decisive for the life of the two persons after death. The rich man, who is not named, lived in selfishness. His clothing was of the finest. Although he may have understood his wealth as a blessing from God, God, the Giver of every gift, was missing from his life. He seemed to know nothing of love for his neighbor, as his behavior toward the poor man makes clear. The poor man shared the lot of the dogs at the entrance gate to the rich man's house, where he eked out a miserable existence as a beggar, living on the rich man's scraps. It was not wealth that was the rich man's sin, but his selfishness, in which he paid no attention to the poor man, although he perhaps saw him every day. The dogs apparently showed Lazarus more compassion than the rich man did.

The poor man's name is given, in contrast to that of the rich man. *Lazarus* means "God is help." In this name lies the key to the poor man's attitude toward life. He found help in God, on whom he was cast in his poverty. Yet it was not his poverty that brought him into Abraham's bosom after death, but his trust in God.

As for every person, so for these two the day came when they had to say farewell to the earth. Both died the same death. The rich man received a burial; the poor man's burial is not mentioned. With their death, however, things are suddenly seen in a different light.

When a person dies, the hour of truth comes, in which it becomes clear to him what really counts and endures beyond death. Then there is neither self-deception nor unbelief; the

person then no longer asks for the proofs he always demanded during his life whenever life after death was mentioned to him.

Jesus makes it clear that the difference between the two after their death is much greater than it was in their earthly life. The tables have turned, for the poor man is in the place of blessing and has no reason to regret his departure from earthly life. Angels, who are ministering spirits for those who are to inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14), carry Lazarus into Abraham's bosom at the moment of his death.

2.1.5 Jewish Ideas of the Hereafter

It is generally recognized that the Lord Jesus here takes up the ideas of His hearers, which were familiar to Him as a Jew Himself. It is therefore helpful to explain briefly the ideas about the hereafter held at that time.

The Jews believed that the souls or spirits of the dead go to Sheol. This is the realm of the dead, which is only a temporary dwelling place in expectation of the resurrection. They also believed – and this went beyond the biblical testimony of the Old Testament – that there was a separation there between the righteous and the unrighteous. The one group was in bliss, and the other received punishment and retribution. That is why for them there was no question that the dead retained their full consciousness, because otherwise blessing and punishment would have been meaningless.

The historian Josephus describes the belief of the Pharisees as follows: “They also believe that souls are immortal and that, according to whether a person has been virtuous or wicked, they receive reward or punishment beneath the earth, so that the wicked must languish in everlasting imprisonment.”³¹ Against this background it was not difficult for the Pharisees to understand this story. Jesus spoke about the life and existence of the

human being after death, and about how this existence is determined by life on earth.

It is not my intention to examine how the Pharisees arrived at this view, which goes beyond the Old Testament. What is important is that this belief does not contradict the Old Testament. Nor does the Lord Jesus condemn or correct this view; rather, He takes up the basic idea³² of this conception, while at the same time revealing in divine omniscience what comes after death.

31. Flavius Josephus, *Jüdische Altertümer*, Book 18, ch. 1.3., Wiesbaden (Fourier Verlag), 1985, pp. 506, 507.

32. I deliberately speak of the “basic idea,” because in the thinking of that time there was a vivid imagination that is not confirmed by Luke 16.

The Son of God makes it clear here – and that uninfluenced by Jewish and Greek philosophy – that there is a life after death, both in joy and in torment. Whoever acknowledges Jesus Christ cannot reinterpret these words without thereby calling His person into question.

2.1.6 Abraham's Bosom

Abraham's bosom is a typically Jewish expression. It was familiar to the listeners. In the Bible this expression occurs only once. Abraham's bosom was the place of blessing into which the righteous person was received after his death. The expression "the bosom of the righteous" also denoted, for the Jews, a place beyond death. Abraham, the friend of God, is at the center here. That Abraham continued to live after his death was not in question for the Jews (Luke 20:27-40). For the Jew, Abraham's bosom was a place of honor that he absolutely wanted to occupy after his death. This place points to fellowship, closeness and joy (John 1:18; 13:23).

The teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ applies not only to Jews, even though He took up their ideas; in agreement with other words of the New Testament, it extends in principle to all people. That is why "Abraham's bosom" can also be called "paradise." This thought too was not foreign to the Jews. It is echoed, for example, in the "Targum on the Song of Songs,"³³ where it is said that the souls of the righteous who have died are carried by the angels into paradise.

Abraham's bosom is not, as is sometimes claimed, the future kingdom of God. A meal with the patriarchs in this kingdom is indeed spoken of elsewhere (Matthew 8:11), but that will take place on earth. That, however, is not what this is about. In this story we see that Lazarus and the rich man are not on earth but outside the visible world. At the same time the rich man's five brothers were still living on earth. The rich man wanted someone to be sent from the dead to warn them, since they were obviously living as he once had.

2.1.7 How Did Lazarus Come to Abraham's Bosom?

When a person dies, his spirit-soul lives on while the body decays. In this story, however, Lazarus is portrayed as a whole person who was carried into Abraham's bosom. It does not say that only his spirit-soul was carried there. This is not a contradiction, for the departed souls are always spoken of as if

33. An apocryphal book from the period between the two Testaments.

they were in the state of bodily life. The feelings and expressions of life of the departed cannot be described, either in words or in images, in any other way than the Lord Jesus does here, corresponding to the reality of bodily life.

The description of the events that follow the death of the two does not differ from the description of their life before death. As far as their consciousness and perception are concerned, death has evidently changed nothing here. The human personality, conscious perception of one's surroundings and memory are preserved without restriction after death.

2.1.8 Hades

The rich man lifts up his eyes in Hades and finds himself in torment. Hades was a well-known term from the Greek world. There it was the god of the underworld and also the place of the dead.

Hades must not be confused with hell. Unfortunately, in some Bible translations (e.g., Luther's) the Greek word "Hades" used here is rendered "hell" (German: *Hölle*), so that one might assume that both terms refer to the same thing. They are, however, two different things, as I will explain in more detail later. Before we look more closely at Hades in Luke 16, let us consider – so as not to arrive at an "isolated" and therefore wrong explanation – all 10 passages in the New Testament where Hades is mentioned.

1st and 3rd occurrences: "And you, Capernaum, who have been exalted to heaven, you will be brought down to Hades" (Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15).

Here "Hades" stands in contrast to "heaven." Capernaum was exalted to heaven because the Messiah had done most of His mighty works in this city (Matthew 9:1). Here the deep fall of Capernaum on the day of judgment is made clear by the great contrast between the "highest" and the "lowest" place. In this sense "above" and "below" are often spoken of.³⁴ Here Hades is the place of judgment, which is unreachably far from heaven, the place of blessing.

2nd occurrence: "and on this rock I will build my assembly [or: church], and the gates of Hades shall not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18).

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, is the impregnable and immovable foundation on which He would build His church. Built on this rock, the church cannot be overcome even by Hades. Hades has power, which is expressed symbolically in the gates. Behind Hades lies the power of death.

34. Cf. John 8:23; 1 Timothy 6:9; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Revelation 20:1; Proverbs 9:18; 15:24.

Hades and the power of death cannot overcome and “take” the church, because it is founded on the One who is life and has conquered death. Hades is an evil power, which here appears as an enemy of the church.

4th occurrence: “And in Hades, lifting up his eyes, being in torment, he sees Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:23).

5th and 6th occurrences: Peter said of the Lord Jesus, quoting Psalm 16: “For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 2:27; see also v. 31).

David had spoken these words centuries earlier (Psalm 16:10). Peter quotes them in his sermon on the day of Pentecost as a prophecy about the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Hades, as it were, stretched out its hands toward the holy soul of the Savior in order to seize it and take possession of it. But Hades could not take hold of His soul, because He was the Holy One of God.³⁵ When He died, He did not fall prey to Hades but went to paradise. His body was laid in the tomb, but it did not see corruption, because He was raised.

Here it becomes clear that Hades is the place where the souls of the unrighteous are. The body, the flesh, is connected with the grave and with corruption. The soul, here and in all other places, is connected with Hades. Here the grave and Hades are clearly distinguished from each other. They are not one and the same thing.

7th occurrence: “... I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (Revelation 1:18).

These are the words of the Lord Jesus as the Risen One. Because He died and rose again, He has power over death and Hades. Both death (with regard to the body) and Hades (with regard to the soul) had to bow before the Son of God. Everything is subject to Him! The realm of the dead and all who are there are placed under His authority, for “to this end Christ died and lived again, that

35. Most translations have here: “you will not leave my soul in Hades” or something similar. With this wording the Lord would have been in Hades. In this view Hades, like Sheol, is generally the place of the dead, without distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous. This corresponds to the statements of the Old Testament. See on this C. Briem, *Ein Volk für seinen Namen*, part 2, Hückeswagen (CSV), 1983, pp. 100–103. I do not share this view, because it is precisely Luke, the author of Acts, who alone in his Gospel on the one hand contrasts Hades and Abraham’s bosom in Luke 16 (i.e., Abraham’s bosom is not in Hades or a part of it) and on the other hand quotes the Lord as saying that when He died He went to paradise. Moreover, at the time of Jesus the view already existed that the place of the blessed is in heaven and the place of the unrighteous is in Sheol. I consider Hades in the New Testament consistently as the place of the unrighteous, who are under the power of death. Christ was not there (see the appendix on this).

he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (Romans 14:9). Believers no longer need to be afraid!

His power also consists in raising the dead, by opening Hades with the key and leading out the souls in order to unite them with the body in the resurrection.

8th occurrence: “And I [John] looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him” (Revelation 6:8).

Death and Hades are closely connected with each other, since they accomplish a common task.³⁶ In what does their cooperation consist? Death seizes the body and Hades the soul. In this sense Hades follows death in order to receive the souls that death cannot touch (Matthew 10:28).

In terms of its linguistic history, the expression “Hades” can mean “the one that receives everything.” Hades devours the dead with insatiable hunger. In this there is a similarity with Sheol (the Hades of the Old Testament), which in Hebrew linguistic awareness was associated with “demanding” (cf. Acts 2:27, 31).³⁷

9th and 10th occurrences: “and Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:13-14).

The dead are in Hades. Alongside the story in Luke 16, this is the clearest indication of the nature of Hades. Hades is the place of the dead who have not believed the gospel. Only these appear before the great white throne.

Here we find the end of physical death. Death is thrown into the lake of fire, that is, hell. Because at this point all the dead have been raised, there are no longer any souls or spirits of the dead who could be in Hades. This is necessarily also the end of Hades. The lost are thrown into hell with the body they received in the resurrection. That is why Hades is no longer needed and, like death, finds its end in hell.

Summary: Hades receives the souls of the dead that are separated from the body through death. Hades is connected with the power of death. Only unbelievers are subject to this death, which leads to eternal destruction. So Hades is also only the dwelling place of those dead who died without Christ.

36. Cf. 2 Samuel 22:6; Isaiah 28:15, 18; Hosea 13:14; Habakkuk 2:5.

37. Proverbs 1:12; 27:20; 30:16; Isaiah 5:14.

Hades is the place of passage and the dwelling place of the ungodly until the resurrection.

2.1.9 Hades in Luke 16

The meaning of Hades in Luke 16 corresponds exactly to what has become clear from the passages examined. In addition, there are further details that are mentioned only here.

The rich man was buried. His spirit-soul, on the other hand, was not in the grave but in Hades. The first thing said about him is that he was “in torment.” So he had not lost his capacity to feel through death. He had kept not only his capacity to feel but also his full consciousness beyond death: he speaks, expresses his thoughts and is able to remember. Moreover, he can perceive with his eyes the surroundings, which are marked by torment and suffering. The rich man himself calls these surroundings a “place” of torment (v. 28). So Hades is not only a state but also an actual place where one dwells.

The torment felt by the rich man and the heat of the flame seem to presuppose a bodily existence of flesh and blood. But after death and until his resurrection, man no longer has this. That is why we understand this depiction of suffering as a figurative description of a reality that is foreign to us who are still in the body, and whose depth and extent are understood only by the one who endures it himself. This image, which we encounter in a similar form in connection with hell, is necessary to present the sufferings of Hades to us in such a way that we can understand them.

Hermann Cremer describes these sufferings: “[The soul] in death resembles the poor man who has too much to die and too little to live – a dreadful state, this hanging and trembling between life and death, this dying without end! As long as death has not yet opened a person’s eyes to this, he can deceive himself and give himself over to the delusion that nothing is lacking to his soul. We can escape all the feelings and needs of our soul as long as we are masters of our body and can engage with the world around us in work or distraction. But with death this possibility ceases, and the helplessness of the soul becomes manifest in endless wasting away. Torn away from God in estrangement from God, it is also estranged from the life that comes from God. ... forever powerless, hindered and bound, its immortality is for it not something better than death, but something far more wretched and worse: an eternal struggle for existence,

an eternal deprivation of all satisfaction, a consuming of itself without end under the opposition of the holy God to everything ungodly and estranged from God. For sinful, unredeemed man, immortality is nothing other than eternal death – no ray of light that brightens the night, but only a shadow cast by the light.”³⁸

This, of course, is anything but soul sleep, let alone nonexistence after death. This story proves exactly the opposite. In order to maintain the false teaching of soul sleep, a completely different interpretation of this story is required, one that claims that Hades is nothing other than the grave in which the rich man’s corpse was buried. Appeal is made to readings that change the meaning of the sentence through different punctuation.³⁹ In this way Hades becomes the grave into which the rich man was laid. It is read as follows: “The rich man died and was buried in Hades. When he lifted up his eyes in torment ...” For this division of the text there are not even two or three Greek textual witnesses. Nor is this division found in any of the Bible translations known today to be reliable.

The context of the text and its agreement in content with the whole New Testament are decisive for the punctuation of a sentence. As we have already seen, no passage in the New Testament confirms that Hades is identical with the grave.

In terms of its linguistic history, the word “Hades” also has the meaning “the invisible” and “the imperceptible.”⁴⁰ For this reason too it is not possible for the expression “Hades” to refer to a grave.

It may be that the view that Hades and the grave are the same arose because “Hades” is indeed the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Sheol”; but the word “Sheol” has a broader meaning in the Old Testament, as we will see in the next section.

2.1.10 Sheol

From the quotation of Psalm 16:10 in Acts 2:27 it can be seen that “Hades” is the translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol.” In the Septuagint the word “Sheol” is translated “Hades,” but sometimes also “death.” In the Old

38. Hermann Cremer, *Jenseits des Grabes*, Gießen (Brunnen-Verlag), n.d., pp. 31, 32.

39. Punctuation refers to the punctuation marks, which did not exist in the original text and were added only several centuries later.

40. Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Vol. 2 (Paternoster Press) 1981, p. 206

Testament “Sheol” occurs 65 times. More than half of these occurrences are found in the books of Job, Psalms and Proverbs.

What meaning does Sheol have in the Old Testament? We can recognize several meanings of this word in the Old Testament. In general, Sheol has to do with the realm of death, which also includes the fear of death, the grave, the abyss and the realm of the dead.

- Sheol as grave or pit: Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29; Numbers 16:30; Deuteronomy 32:22; 1 Samuel 2:6; Job 7:9; Psalm 139:8; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Ezekiel 31:16.
- Sheol as grave or pit, but with an echo of a conscious life after death: 2 Samuel 22:6; 1 Kings 2:6-9; Job 17:13-16; Amos 9:2.
- Sheol as the realm of the dead, the dwelling place of souls: Psalm 16:10; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20; Isaiah 14:9-15.
- Sheol in a symbolic sense as the power of death, of evil, of fear, of distress and of captivity: Psalm 116:3; Isaiah 28:15; 57:9; Jonah 2:2.

These Bible passages make it clear that the word “Sheol” has several meanings. It would be wrong to say that Sheol is always the grave or the pit. It is therefore just as wrong to transfer this meaning to Hades in the New Testament.

The idea of Sheol among the Jews at the time when Jesus told this story corresponded essentially to the description of Sheol or Hades in Luke 16.

Strack & Billerbeck write: “The various points of contact between Enoch 22 and Luke 16:19ff. make it probable that the conception of Sheol represented by Enoch 22 had found a certain currency among the Jewish people and in Jesus’ day represented the popular average opinion.”⁴¹

In various Jewish writings (such as Enoch), Hades was the dwelling place of the spirits or souls of the dead. Alongside this, the idea was also widespread that Sheol had compartments for the righteous and the unrighteous. The righteous, it was believed, had joy there, the unrighteous torment.

Even though Sheol is often the grave, Sheol and the grave are nevertheless two different terms that are not always used synonymously. The grave – which, unlike Sheol, also occurs in the plural – is dug (e.g., Genesis 50:5), it belongs to particular persons (e.g., 1 Kings 13:30; 2 Chronicles 34:28), and the corpse is

41. From *Kommentar zu Talmud und Midrasch IV*.

laid in it.⁴² These characteristics do not apply to Sheol. King Hezekiah mentions in one sentence three terms that he distinguished and that therefore cannot mean the same thing: “For Sheol does not praise you; death does not sing your praise; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness” (Isaiah 38:18).

Regarding “Sheol” in connection with “Hades” in the New Testament, the following must therefore be noted:

In the Old Testament the things beyond the grave were not revealed at all, or only by way of hints. That is why not much can be said about Sheol from the perspective of the Old Testament. It is not permissible to transfer just *one* of the above meanings of Sheol (e.g., that of the grave) to Hades in the New Testament.

2.1.11 Lifting Up His Eyes

We read that the rich man lifted up his eyes in Hades (Luke 16:23). “Lifting up the eyes” makes one think of a person waking up from sleep. Jesus uses this expression to describe the surprise, the astonishment and at the same time the horror of the rich man. He suddenly perceives surroundings and a state that are completely different from what he had been used to until then. As a descendant of Abraham he had not expected this.

Those who try to find the doctrine of soul sleep in this story explain “lifting up the eyes” as the resurrection. Indeed, no other explanation remains if one says that Hades is the grave. In the grave no eyes are opened. At first glance this explanation does not seem entirely far-fetched, because the connection between the sleep of death and awakening in connection with the resurrection is obvious. And yet this explanation is questionable, because in verses 30 and 31 of this story the resurrection is spoken of literally. It is unusual for the resurrection to be referred to literally in one place but only figuratively in another.

The word “lift up” (Greek: *epairo*) frequently occurs in connection with the “eyes” and with “seeing.”⁴³ The New Testament never uses this expression to describe the process of waking from sleep, let alone the resurrection. When the unrighteous are raised, they will immediately afterward be judged before the

42. E.g., 2 Kings 13:21; Psalm 88:5; Jeremiah 26:23.

43. E.g., Matthew 17:8; Luke 6:20; 18:13; John 4:35; 6:5; 17:1.

great white throne and thrown into the lake of fire, which is hell (Revelation 20:11-15). The final judgment is not contained in this story. In Hades the rich man is not yet brought before the Judge. Hades is not the final state; the lake of fire is. Hades must not be confused with hell, even though there is already torment and agony there. When sinners are thrown into hell, Hades, which has served as the dwelling place of the unrighteous, is no longer necessary (see above).

2.1.12 Far Off

The rich man sees Lazarus far off in Abraham's bosom. The expression "far off" makes clear the unreachability of this place and the hopelessly lost and unchangeable situation. In a certain sense this distance already existed in the lives of the two men. Now this distance is much greater and can no longer be removed. Is this not also an indication that the distance from God that the ungodly will endure as eternal punishment in hell (2 Thessalonians 1:9) in a certain way already begins immediately after death?

The rich man turns to Abraham to obtain relief from his torments. He asks that Lazarus might dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue. The rich man has understood his situation, for this request is so small and no longer corresponds to his usual behavior as it was known from his life. Does not the drop of water falling from the finger correspond to the crumbs the poor man had longed for in vain? Not even this request is granted. Even Abraham can no longer change anything about the rich man's condition.

From this it becomes clear that any influence on the dead – whether good or evil, whether exercised by people or their prayers, or by angels and demons – is completely ruled out. After death man is solely and entirely in the hand of God (Hebrews 10:31). Holy Scripture knows neither intercession nor prayers for the dead.

2.1.13 The Great Chasm

Between Hades and Abraham's bosom a great chasm has been fixed that cannot be bridged. There is hardly a more impressive description of the fact that after death one can no longer change one's dwelling place. There is no longer any possibility of repentance. The chasm cannot be overcome either by compassion

or by arbitrary decision. The rich man himself sees that there is no longer any possibility for him to escape this place.

After death there is no more mercy, because a person's earthly life offers enough opportunities and time to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 6:2). The Lord Jesus earnestly points out to His listeners that earthly life decides eternity.

Whoever appeals to a possibility of repentance after death – as a second chance – and even proclaims it, is like a wandering star that points the way into darkness (Jude 13). It is fatal to expect a second chance after death. This possibility, however much people would like to have it, does not exist.

For the rich man there is no longer any rescue, but he thinks of his brothers. What can he still do to warn them? The idea comes to him that they might perhaps listen to someone who had been dead and can testify to what comes after death. But Abraham replies that the rich man's brothers would not listen to someone who comes back from the dead either. For those who reject the Word of God today, not even such a spectacular testimony would be enough to move their hearts to repentance.

Some time later the Lord calls another Lazarus back from the dead (John 11). This Lazarus was just the kind of person the rich man had asked for. But in the case of Lazarus, Abraham's answer is confirmed. Instead of accepting His testimony, the Jews even go so far as to plot to kill the Lord of life and death, in order to silence this testimony to His omnipotence.

The Lord Jesus Himself came back from the dead. Although His resurrection was proven by eyewitnesses and His disciples carried this message further, people did not want to accept this testimony. The corrupt hearts of men did not want to bow to the truth.

It is true that the sinner is not led to God by proofs, but only by a repentant heart and an enlightened conscience.

Questions for Further Study

- Give reasons why the story in Luke 16 is not a parable!
- Summarize what the terms "Hades" in the New Testament and "Sheol" in the Old Testament mean!
- What in Luke 16 makes it clear that there can be no second chance after death?

2.2 The God of the Living

The well-known dispute between the Sadducees and Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem is about the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were known for not believing in a resurrection. The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke unanimously mention this.

“Then some of the Sadducees came to him, those who object that there is no resurrection, and they asked him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, having a wife, and he is childless, his brother should take the wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife and died childless; and the second and the third took her; and likewise all seven: they left no children and died. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage; for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses indicated “at the bush,” when he calls the Lord “the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’ Then some of the scribes answered, ‘Teacher, you have spoken well.’ For they no longer dared to ask him any question” (Luke 20:27-40, translated from the German Elberfelder Bible; cf. Mark 12:18-27; Matthew 22:23-33).

Let us take a closer look at the group of the Sadducees and their view.

2.2.1 The Sadducees⁴⁴

Before we examine some details of this text, let us first hear once more from the Gospel writer Luke, this time from the book of Acts: “For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit” (23:8; cf. Acts 4:2). The teaching of the Sadducees was coherent and consistent in itself. If there was no resurrection, then there was also no existence of spirits, that is, spirits of the dead⁴⁵ that are separated from the body (Hebrews 12:23; 1 Peter 3:19).

The extrabiblical testimony of the historian Josephus confirms this when he writes that the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul as well as punishments and rewards in the underworld.⁴⁶

This indicates that the resurrection and an existence of the spirit-soul outside the body after death are directly connected and dependent on each other. The Sadducees knew that the resurrection and the spirit-soul separated from the body do not contradict each other, but are so closely linked that the one cannot exist without the other. That is why they denied both.⁴⁷

The Lord Jesus’ answer to this hair-splitting argument is that God is not the God of the dead but of the living, because all live to Him (v. 38). The Lord draws this fact from the words of Yahweh to Moses from the burning bush: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6; see also vv. 14-15). The listeners knew that none of the three patriarchs was still alive at the time Yahweh spoke these words. They had all died. Now if death means complete, or even only temporary, extinction and nonexistence, how can Yahweh say that He is their God? Then God would indeed be a God of the dead. But God is not the God of something that does

44. The Sadducees (perhaps named after the high priest Zadok in the time of Solomon) emerged from an old priestly aristocracy and, in the period from about 150 BC to AD 70, formed a conservative and pro-Roman party of the Jewish priestly class. In contrast to the Pharisees, whose “traditional” opponents they were, the Sadducees denied a continued life of the soul and the existence of angels and spirits. Likewise they did not believe in divine intervention in human affairs. In addition, as opponents of the Pharisees, they rejected the oral Torah and gave God’s providence precedence over human free will. They recognized only the five books of Moses as revelation, but rejected the hopes of resurrection and the belief in angels (Acts 23:8). Since the Sadducees had no broad support among the people, they disappeared as a politically and religiously influential group.

45. In this verse angels and spirits are distinguished, which proves that the spirits here are the spirits of the dead. In other places angels are also called spirits (e.g., Hebrews 1:14).

46. *Geschichte des Jüdischen Krieges*, Book 2, chapter 8.14.

47. In contrast, however, these doctrines belonged to the convictions of the Pharisees (cf. Acts 23:6-7).

not exist. The listeners understood this, for some of the scribes said that He had spoken well. The Sadducees had no answer to this divine wisdom⁴⁸ – He had silenced them, because they were greatly mistaken (Matthew 22:34).

Some explain this by saying that the patriarchs live in God's memory or purpose, because they will one day be raised. But this verse allows no other conclusion than that the patriarchs, at the time when God spoke from the bush, had to be alive in some way (that is, not merely as a thought in memory). It does not say that God "was" the God of the patriarchs or "will be" with a view to the resurrection, but that He "is," and that to this day. Nor does it say that they "lived" to Him, but that they "live."

Only Luke reports that the Lord Jesus extends the fact that the dead live to all people, for He says: "for *all* live to him" (that is, not only the patriarchs). This clearly includes those who – like the patriarchs – died long ago.

2.2.2 Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration

The Gospel writers themselves give an example of two believers from Old Testament times who lived after their death. At the glorification of Jesus⁴⁹ on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared. Elijah had not died but had been taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:11), as had Enoch (Genesis 5:24).

It is still understandable that Elijah appeared there in person, because he had not died. But what about Moses? He died (Deuteronomy 34:6; cf. Jude 9). Where, then, did Moses come from, if he no longer lived after death? Had he already been raised? The Bible says nothing about that, and it cannot be so, because not Moses but Christ is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23), and the resurrection of believers has not yet taken place.

The eternal God (Romans 16:26) is the God of the living. Therefore Moses too is alive now, after his death and before his resurrection. God did not raise Moses and Elijah for this appearance and then put them back to sleep. And it is inconceivable that they alone – and not all believers – should be in a conscious and blessed state. The believers of all ages are now all in paradise.⁵⁰

48. Interestingly, Jesus had quoted from Exodus, since the Sadducees recognized only the 5 books of Moses as God's Word. In His statements about the resurrection, the existence of angels and immortality (for angels do not die), He refuted several of the Sadducees' positions at once.

49. Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36.

50. Cf. section 2.3.

So both from the appearance of Moses and Elijah and from the words of the Lord when He answered the Sadducees, as well as from the context of the whole of Holy Scripture, it becomes clear that all who have died are alive.

For many Jews (the Sadducees excepted) it was taken for granted that the dead were alive. They believed, for example, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were now in a place to which the faithful Jew also went, in order to be received there by the patriarchs.⁵¹

God Himself is the sustainer of life not only for people living on earth, but also for the dead, because they and everything that lives at all depend on Him. In this sense the immortality of the soul is not an immortality in itself, but is dependent on God as the source of life.

When the Lord Jesus spoke about the patriarchs, it was not about the state after death but about the resurrection. But He said that one proof of the resurrection is the fact that the patriarchs were alive at that time. This is extremely important and, in short, means: Because the souls of the dead are alive, there must be a resurrection. Why is this so?

2.2.3 The Connection between Life after Death and the Resurrection

Death, which came into the world through sin, thwarted God's plan of creation with regard to man. Death puts an end to physical life, to man's bodily existence on earth, while man nevertheless lives on as a spirit-soul personality. A spirit-soul personality without a body, however, was not God's intention when He created man.⁵² Because His purposes and plans are irrevocable (Romans 11:29), the body must be raised, so that the plans God had from the beginning may be fulfilled and man may be restored in his "wholeness." Death does not have the last word. Souls without a body would, if that were their eternal state, prove that death had won. In contrast to this stood Greek belief, which regarded death as a permanent liberation from the body. The resurrection restores man in the unity God intended for him.

51. Apocryphal 4 Maccabees 13:16.

52. Cf. section 3.4.

2.2.4 The Image of the Seed

The image that Paul uses to illustrate the resurrection is also in keeping with the fact that *all* live. He speaks of the seed that is first put into the ground before it bears fruit. He compares it with the dead body of the believer who has died, which will one day rise (1 Corinthians 15:35-44; cf. John 12:24).

It is interesting that the seed in the ground does not actually die in the sense that the organic process comes completely to an end. If the seed were to perish completely and dissolve, no fruit would ever come forth. But from the germ, which remains alive, a new plant emerges. The germ carries within itself all the genetic information that determines the plant that is to grow. The seed coat or husk that encloses the germ falls away and perishes. In the literal sense, then, only this part dies.

This process is a further indication of the fact that man (in 1 Corinthians 15 it is a believer) lives on after his death. The outer husk of the seed is compared with the body, which perishes. The germ can be compared with the inner man (2 Corinthians 4:16), the spirit-soul. This part of man lives on after death. At the same time, this is the reason why the body will be raised again, just as the germ brings forth new fruit.

We point out that sowing the seed in the ground is expressly called “dying,” even though part of it obviously lives on. This is not a contradiction, because in the Bible the death of a human being never means his complete end, but the separation of the spirit-soul from the body.

Questions for Further Study

- What is the connection between life after death and the resurrection?
- Why must there be a resurrection?
- In what way is the image of the seed a picture not only of the resurrection but also of life after death?

2.3 The Criminal on the Cross

The words of the Lord Jesus Christ to one of the criminals clearly show that there is a life after death. There He says: “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The scene at Golgotha is moving. For the two criminals on the right and left of Jesus, the end had come. They were receiving what their deeds deserved.

There was no longer the slightest glimmer of hope for them. In his despair, one of the criminals, repenting of his guilt, turns to the man in the middle – it was the only thing he could still do. He said: “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom!” (Luke 23:42). The criminal senses that the man beside him, of whose innocence he is convinced, must be the Messiah and King promised by God. So if there is still any hope for him at all, it is with the One who would one day, as King over all, have the last word.

In these moments the criminal was thinking about the future, about the time when the Messiah would come to begin His reign. That was where the hope of the Jew was directed. Much was known from the Old Testament about the Messiah: His reign, His kingdom, His greatness and power.⁵³ The criminal knew about the resurrection at the appearing of the Messiah at the beginning of His kingdom (Daniel 12:2; Isaiah 26:19). He asked Him to remember him, so that he might share in His kingdom.

The Lord Jesus gives a remarkable answer: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” The answer seems so remarkable because in His words the Savior does not actually respond to the criminal’s request. The criminal is thinking of the future kingdom, but the Savior speaks of paradise. He does not speak of the future, but of a “today.”

It happened that the Lord Jesus sometimes seemed not to respond directly to the questions put to Him. But if you look more closely, you will find how wonderful His answers are, because they reveal far more than the questions were even aiming at (cf. John 2:19-22). So it is here too, for paradise and kingdom obviously do not mean the same thing.

Let us therefore examine what is to be understood by the term *paradise* in Scripture and what idea the criminal, or the Jew in general, had of paradise.

2.3.1 Paradise

The word probably comes from Persian and means something like “round enclosure or rampart,” “park.” At that time it was used for the magnificent gardens of Persian kings. It was also used in a similar way in the Old Testament.⁵⁴ In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it is

53. E.g., Psalm 2; 8; 24; Isaiah 4; 9; 11; 53; Daniel 2; 7; Micah 5, among others.

54. Nehemiah 2:8; Ecclesiastes 2:5; Song of Solomon 4:13.

used for the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise⁵⁵, or simply for a garden.⁵⁶ From the first chapters of the Bible we can see what a beautiful place the earthly paradise was. God had prepared it as a dwelling place for man. After the Fall, man was driven out of paradise and was not allowed to enter it again. After that we hear nothing more of this paradise. The original, earthly paradise in Eden no longer exists. So it is clear that the Lord Jesus did not mean this paradise.

Since what the Old Testament tells us is limited to the paradise in Eden, and since no other paradise is spoken of anywhere in the Old Testament, we will draw on Jewish tradition as an extrabiblical source of information in order to find out what was understood by *paradise* in the time of Jesus.

2.3.2 Paradise in Jewish Tradition

At the time of Jesus, Jewish tradition, or the ancient synagogue, knew of paradise in three different forms.⁵⁷

- The original, earthly paradise, which was formative for all further ideas of paradise.
- The paradise of souls, which serves as a dwelling place for the souls of the righteous who have fallen asleep during the intermediate state. People believed in a heavenly paradise of souls. According to this idea, Enoch and Elijah, but also the patriarchs, had been taken up there.
- The paradise of the end times on earth, whose center will be Israel and Jerusalem under the Messiah, and which will be given to the blessed after the resurrection and the final judgment.

Since God had closed off the earthly paradise and withdrawn it from the earth, people had come to the conviction that it was now in heaven and at the same time would reappear as the paradisiacal kingdom of peace. The earthly paradise becomes the model for the paradise of the hereafter and of the future.

Other designations known from Judaism for the heavenly dwelling place of the blessed are:

55. Genesis 2:8; 13:10; Isaiah 51:3; Ezekiel 31:8.

56. Numbers 24:6; Isaiah 1:30; Ezekiel 31:8.

57. Strack & Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, München (C.H. Beck).

- “Land of the living” – based on Psalm 116:9: “I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”
- “The bundle of the living” (1 Samuel 25:29) – the bundle of the living, which is bound up with the Lord, was often understood as the place of the blessed.
- “Treasure house”⁵⁸ – “may your soul be kept in the treasure house of eternal life.”
- “Under the throne of God” – the souls of the righteous are kept under the throne of glory.⁵⁹
- “Heaven” – the souls remain in heaven until they are reunited with the body in the resurrection.

This evidence makes it clear that at the time of Jesus there was an understanding or idea of the hereafter that went considerably beyond the revelation of the Old Testament. Where this understanding came from is difficult to determine. What is decisive is that in this context Jesus uses the terms “paradise” (Luke 23:43), “hell”⁶⁰ and “Hades” (e.g., Luke 16:23), which described the belief in the hereafter held by the Jews of that time, and especially by the Pharisees. Paul was a Pharisee, and he too believed in the continued life of the soul after death and in the resurrection. So these terms were not new to the Jews. In using them, the Lord Jesus Christ sanctions the central message of this belief, which contained a certain degree of truth.⁶¹ This background is helpful for our understanding. But the standard for judging what divine truth is always remains the Bible alone, the inspired Word of God.

2.3.3 Paradise in the New Testament

It is obvious that the Lord Jesus takes up the idea of that time in which paradise is the place where the departed souls of the righteous are. This follows necessarily from the situation. On the day of their death on the cross they would go to paradise. In essence the Savior says: “You do not need to wait until I appear in royal power; no, you can follow me into paradise today.” The Savior

58. Ibid.

59. Cf. Revelation 6:9.

60. Greek “Gehenna” (e.g., Matthew 5:22).

61. See on this “Facts and Theories as to a future State” in F.W. Grant, *Old Testament Shadows*, Charlotte, North Carolina (Books for Christians), 1972, pp. 246ff.

died on that day and gave His spirit into the hands of the Father. The criminal died shortly after Him. When the Lord died, He went to paradise, and the criminal followed Him there as a pardoned sinner.

Besides Luke 23:43, the word “paradise” occurs only twice more in the New Testament. Paul reports about paradise and the extraordinary experience of being caught up there:

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know; God knows) – such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know that this man (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows) was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man may not utter” (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

Paul calls paradise the third heaven. This designation occurs only in this context and clearly shows that it is a heavenly paradise. The term “third heaven” as a synonym for paradise can be explained as follows: the first heaven is the atmosphere in which we live, the second heaven is the space of the stars, and the third heaven is paradise, where God dwells.

We find a helpful parallel in Hebrews 9:23 (cf. 8:5). There it says that the tabernacle and the worship connected with it in the Old Testament are a copy of the heavenly things. The “third heaven” indicates a sequence and gradation such as can also be seen in the tabernacle. Through the outer court (1) one went through the Holy Place (2) into the Most Holy Place (3). There was the ark of the covenant, the throne of God. There God dwelt. The tabernacle was the house of God, God’s dwelling place on earth.⁶²

The term “*third heaven*” therefore suggests the thought of God’s dwelling place. That is an essential characteristic of paradise. Consequently the glory of God is there, as it once was in the tabernacle. This glory is now seen in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4-6), for He is seated there at the right hand of God (1 Peter 3:22).

It was impossible for Paul to tell of this overwhelming glory in human words. What he saw and heard there surpassed human imagination, as can be gathered from his words.

62. On the basis of the finished work of Christ, believers now have, spiritually and by faith, free access into the presence of God, into His immediate nearness (Hebrews 4:16; 10:19ff.; Ephesians 2:18).

We have already noted that when the Lord Jesus turned to the criminal, He took up the Jewish idea of paradise as the dwelling place of souls after death. In 2 Corinthians 12:2, however, this meaning cannot be found. From this it follows, as the third passage will also show, that we cannot limit the term “paradise” merely to the dwelling place of believers who have fallen asleep. Paradise was not “set up” for this purpose and for a limited time. It was certainly not God’s intention to acquaint Paul with the state of the believers who have fallen asleep in paradise. No, His purpose was to show him heavenly glories, whose center is the glorified Christ,⁶³ as encouragement and equipping for his further ministry.

And yet a fundamental fact emerges from 2 Corinthians 12 that is decisive for the intermediate state. Paul mentions twice (verses 2, 3) that he did not know whether he had been caught up into paradise in the body or out of the body. Accordingly, it was possible for him to be in paradise outside the body. This is exactly what happens when a believer dies. His body perishes and decays, while the spirit-soul goes to paradise. This is clear proof that there is a conscious existence outside the body, or without the body.

In Revelation 2:7 paradise is mentioned for the third time:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the assemblies! To the one who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Here too the heavenly paradise is mentioned. The description takes up the description of the garden in Eden. For here too the tree of life is spoken of. At that time it stood in the middle of the garden (Genesis 2:9), just as Christ, since His ascension, is as the glorified man the center of the heavenly paradise. In the tree of life, Christ is seen as the true source of life (John 14:6; Acts 3:15).

The overcomers are promised that they will eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. This promise, which in principle applies to all believers, is not limited to the time after death until the resurrection, but will be the blessing of believers for all eternity. That is why we also still find the tree of life in the new creation (Revelation 22:2, 14, 19).

Here too the term “paradise” is not limited to a temporary intermediate state and dwelling place of departed souls. Here it is the paradise of the kingdom of

63. Ephesians 1:3; 2:6; Colossians 3:1-4; Philippians 3:20.

peace and of the new creation, in which the nations and the risen saints will then enjoy the tree of life.

From this study we conclude that the heavenly paradise is (and always has been) the place where God the Father dwells. The Lord went to the Father when on the cross He gave His spirit into His hands. This place of God's immediate presence is filled with the glory of God, which is now seen in Christ. That is where the saints of all ages go when they fall asleep. They go home, for heaven is their home (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 3:20). There they (that is, their spirit-soul) remain until the day of resurrection. There they enjoy rest from their labors (Revelation 14:13) in the presence of their Redeemer (Philippians 1:23).

2.3.4 Is Another Interpretation of Luke 23:43 Possible?

If one assumes that there is no life after death, then paradise naturally cannot be the place of departed souls. That is why people try to argue that paradise here is the future kingdom. But Jewish tradition (see above) refutes this idea. Not least, the Lord's words on the cross make this clear: "Today [not in the future] you will be with me in paradise." The Lord spoke of "today" because He went to paradise on the day of His death.

For the view that the kingdom and paradise are identical, the word "today" poses a problem, because the kingdom in power does not yet exist. People have tried to solve this problem by placing the comma or colon not before "today" but after it. Then "today" no longer refers to the time of entering paradise but to the time when Jesus spoke.

As a basic point, it should be noted that the writers of the New Testament knew no punctuation. Punctuation marks and word divisions were only inserted later, around the 4th century AD. However, only a single(!) manuscript uses punctuation to connect "today" with the time of speaking⁶⁴ rather than with entering paradise.⁶⁵ That would also run completely contrary to Luke's usage, as the passages Luke 2:11; 4:21; 19:5, 9; 22:34 show.

64. Syriac manuscript, Curetonian Syriac, 5th century.

65. This verse was also altered or supplemented in the course of copying. From some manuscripts one can see that phrases such as "Take courage," "Garden of Eden" instead of "paradise," and "Do you really believe" were added later. See Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, London (United Bible Societies), 1975, pp. 181, 182.

The same applies to James 4:13 and Hebrews 3:7. In these verses we find a comparable sentence construction. Here too “today” does not stand there to indicate the time of speaking but to emphasize the time of the event. The meaning of the word “today” is unambiguous. In Luke there would, moreover, be a superfluous duplication, since the words “I say to you” are already in the present tense. Was the criminal unclear about when he was hearing the Lord’s words? No.

In His answer the Lord Jesus addresses the criminal’s real need. That need concerned what would happen to him on the day of his death, on the “today” of the cross. Where would he go on the other side of death? The Lord Jesus addresses this essential question, which was decisive in those moments, even though the criminal himself had not asked about it. So in the hours of death the criminal’s expectation and hope are more than fulfilled. They are far surpassed, for he may follow Christ into the heavenly paradise immediately after his death.

With this we are given a divine word of comfort, namely, that what was granted to the criminal also applies to us. Our condition was exactly that of the criminal. We were without hope and, through the guilt of sin, delivered over to the sentence of death. But His grace lifted the sentence, because He died on the cross. And that is why we too, if we die before His coming, may go to paradise. We may not be spared from dying, just as the criminal was not spared. But death brings us to our Lord.

After man forfeited access to paradise through his own disobedience, it is Christ who by His grace opens the way into paradise for us – and not only in the new creation, but already when we die.

Questions for Further Study

- What does “paradise” mean
- in the Old Testament?
- for Jesus Christ in Luke 23?
- for Paul in 2 Corinthians 12?
- Who is there?
- What significance does paradise have for human beings in general?

2.4 Eternal Glory – Hope in the Face of Death

The text from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is perhaps the most detailed and illuminating passage on our subject that we find in the letters of the New Testament. Constant confrontation with death through suffering for Christ's sake moves the apostle Paul to write about death, the resurrection and the time in between. These verses contain a tremendous, divine comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:16) that the world does not know (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Actually, one would think that the Corinthians had already been taught about this subject in detail in 1 Corinthians 15. There the point was to oppose a heresy that denied the resurrection (v. 12). This led Paul to write fundamental things about the resurrection. Here the point is how this hope works in the hardship of daily life – what encouragement, what comfort and what confidence it can give. Because of the context, we quote the text from 2 Corinthians 4:16 to 5:10:

“Therefore we do not lose heart, but even though our outer man is wasting away, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For the quickly passing lightness of our affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, as we look not at the things that are seen but at the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

“For we know that if our earthly house, the tent [or: tent-house], is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this one, indeed, we groan, longing to be further clothed with our dwelling that is from heaven – if indeed, when we are clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in the tent indeed groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. But the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord (for we walk by faith, not by sight); but we are of good courage and would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. Therefore we also make it our aim, whether at home or away, to be pleasing to him. For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what he has done in the body, according to what he has practiced, whether good or evil” (translated from the German Elberfelder Bible).

In this passage of Scripture the temporal, transient things and the eternal, heavenly things are set against each other. On the scales of faith, affliction weighs nothing compared to the weight of eternal glory. By faith we already look now toward the future glory to which we have been called (1 Peter 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:12) – indeed, which is already now our possession by faith. It is the constant endeavor of the Holy Spirit to keep the hope of glory alive in our hearts (Colossians 1:27; Titus 2:13; 1 Peter 4:14). This is absolutely necessary, since we are inclined to orient our lives toward visible things and to let them determine us (4:18).

Paul writes of eternal glory when he thinks of the sufferings brought about by his tireless service for Christ. How often he looked death in the face (2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 11:23-28)! There was the possibility that he would suffer death for Christ's sake. Paul no longer seems to rule out that he would die before the return of Christ.

This text is about dying, about the state after death until the resurrection, and about the resurrection and transformation of the mortal body. To explain this vividly, Paul uses three images from daily life. They are images that bring future things closer to us. None of the writers of the New Testament could describe this intermediate state or the resurrection body in glory in such a way that we could have understood it.⁶⁶ No, for us there remains a great, expectant suspense as to how glorious it will one day be.

Paul uses the following images in the first 10 verses of chapter 5:

- The earthly tent
- Being clothed
- The journey and the home

Before we look more closely at the first image, we examine 2 Corinthians 4:16, where we find a key to understanding these images.

"Therefore we do not lose heart, but even though our outer man is wasting away, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day."

Here two essential terms are named that are significant with regard to human existence after death: the outer man and the inner man.

66. Paul had indeed been caught up into paradise, but he too could not report what he had heard, seen and experienced there.

2.4.1 The Outer Man

The outer man is the transient, mortal person whose process of decay takes place before our eyes. In chapters 4 and 5 the outer man is also described with the following expressions:

- jar of clay (4:7)
- body (4:10)
- mortal flesh (4:11)
- earthly tent (5:1)
- what is mortal (5:4)

The “outer man” is what is outwardly visible of a person to the world. In his earthly existence he is consumed and worn down by everything that pours in on him and attacks him. In Paul’s case this happened especially through persecution for Christ’s sake and through his tireless commitment to the kingdom of God and to the church of God (2 Corinthians 4:7-12; 11:23-28).

The outer man surrounds the inner man, as it were, and that is why we also speak of the mortal shell. And yet the separation of soul and body, of the material and the spiritual, is not simple here. The outer man is about everything that makes up our earthly existence in a mortal body. Soulful and mental functions as well as emotions are so connected with the outer man that disappointment, dejection and weariness have their origin there.

The outer man is subject to transience and temporality. In the end, death will break the easily shattered vessel. But the God who raised the Lord Jesus from death will also, in the resurrection, put back together the broken vessel of the body, which has fallen into shards, as it were, and present it perfect (2 Corinthians 4:14).

2.4.2 The Inner Man

But a person consists not only of the outer man but also of the inner man. The inner man describes the inward-facing, immaterial and invisible side of a person. 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10 is about believers,⁶⁷ for only they experience daily renewal. The inner man knows no age limit; he is constantly renewed by the Holy Spirit. The inner man can look at eternal things and grasp them in

67. The unbeliever also has an inner man, but in a different sense, namely the spirit-soul.

faith. God refreshes the inner man, who therefore has a secret source of strength.

Peter speaks of the “hidden person of the heart” (1 Peter 3:4). From the heart comes forth the imperishable (timeless! – that is, always enduring, even beyond death) gentle and quiet spirit.

The Lord Jesus says: “For from *within*, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts ... all these evil things come from *within*, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:21-23; cf. Matthew 7:15; Luke 11:39-40).

The inner man lives from God and for God. He delights in the law of God (Romans 7:22). The believer is strengthened by the Spirit of God in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in his heart through faith (Ephesians 3:16-17).

From all this it follows that what Paul says in verse 18 also applies to the inner man: “for the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” The inner man will live forever.⁶⁸ He is not subject to bodily death.

Why do I call the terms “outer man” and “inner man” key terms?

In the following images we find a correspondence: the tent and the clothing correspond to the outer man. The inner man is at home in this body, and he dwells in it. He dwells in a tent, is clothed, and can be away from the body.

2.4.3 The Earthly Tent

“For we know that if our earthly house, the tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1).

Here the first image is presented: our earthly existence in the human body, the temporal, earthly form of the body, is compared with a tent, in contrast to its eternal, heavenly form, the building from God. Paul the tentmaker (Acts 18:3) speaks from life. The tent is earthly because man was formed from the earth (Genesis 2:7) and has his dwelling in the earthly realm (1 Corinthians 15:48). The tent recalls the instability of life, wandering, and also a short stay in one place. Man will one day have to leave the earth. Furthermore, the tent speaks of shelter and dwelling. One lives in it, just as we live in our body.⁶⁹

68. The inner man is another designation for the new creation or the new man. The eternal life that the believer receives is also closely connected with it.

69. Isaiah 38:12; Mark 14:58; John 2:19-22.

When this earthly tent, our earthly existence in the body, is destroyed by death, we have a building from God *immediately* afterward. That is a great comfort, for then death is the direct transition into a heavenly form of existence that is not made with hands. So it cannot be compared with our earthly existence in our mortal body. This building from God therefore first describes our state after death, which the apostle describes in verse 8 with the expression “at home with the Lord.”

One can also be “unclothed” of this tent by death (v. 4). The three images Paul uses merge into one another, so that in verse 2 the dwelling is at the same time also the clothing. So one can also have “moved out” of this tent and left it (v. 8). This indicates that a person can be (dwell) in the body (the tent), but can also leave it (move out of it) in order to be somewhere else.

We find the same thought in the apostle Peter in 2 Peter 1:13-14. Soon he would die as a martyr and take leave of the earth (v. 15) in order to be at home with his Lord. For his death he uses the word “departure” (Greek: *exodus*). That is the moving out of the earthly tent. It is clear that Peter’s existence did not cease. He went to another place beyond death – to his Lord. He exchanged the fragile tent for the indestructible building of God.

About this form of existence we know only that it is eternal and heavenly. From these two characteristics, however, we can conclude that our blessedness and joy are great even before our resurrection. But it is nevertheless an intermediate state and not the final state. The body has decayed and is still under the power of death. It seems as if death had the last word. If that were so, God could not attain His perfect glorification. But God will reach His final goal, for He is the victor over death. This is proven by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why in the resurrection of believers God will restore the unity of the human being, consisting of spirit, soul and body. Thus the “building from God” also includes our resurrection body, which is our eternal part.

The building has this meaning in the following verses 2 and 4. God gives (builds) the believer an eternal house, in contrast to a fragile tent. That is the body of glory that Christ now has (Philippians 3:21; 1 John 3:2). This house belongs to heaven because it is a heavenly body (1 Corinthians 15:48-49), which has its destiny and home there. It can no longer be touched, let alone destroyed, by death, for it is an eternal house, not made with (human) hands but by God.

2.4.4 Being Clothed

“For in this one, indeed, we groan, longing to be further clothed with our dwelling that is from heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:2).

Our earthly body suffers under the consequences of sin. Every day we groan over the ailments, hardships and limitations that came into the world through sin. That is why we long for the moment when we receive a new body that no longer has anything to do with sin and its consequences. This dwelling stands ready for us. When that happens, we will be “further clothed.” (Here the first image, of the dwelling, merges into the second image, of clothing.) At that moment an exchange of garments takes place. The old garment, what is mortal (v. 4), is laid aside forever, because it must give way to the new garment of life. In 1 Corinthians 15:51-54 this moment is called “being changed.”

We, the living, will be changed when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again to bring the children of God into the heavenly home, into the Father’s house (John 14:3). This verse is only about the believers who are alive at that moment, since the believers who have fallen asleep are not “further clothed” but “clothed” when they receive the resurrection body: “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:53).

The dead in Christ will rise, and the living will be changed. Then all will be like the Son of God and have the heavenly resurrection body, in order to dwell forever in the Father’s heavenly house.⁷⁰

In 2 Corinthians 5:3 Paul utters a solemn warning about nakedness:

“... if indeed, when we are clothed, we shall not be found naked.”

In this parenthetical clause Paul states that, despite being clothed, there is the possibility of being naked. That is an apparent contradiction, for whoever is clothed cannot be naked at the same time. What does it mean to be found naked? This expression has a legal meaning: to appear before a court and be recognized in one’s condition – guilty or innocent. In this verse the verdict “found naked” refers to the spiritual condition of the heart.

70. John 14:1-3; 17:24; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Jude 21.

We find a fitting illustration of this in Adam. After he had sinned, God called him out of his hiding place. He had hidden because he had realized that he was naked (Genesis 3:7, 10-11). To cover his nakedness he had made himself an apron of fig leaves. But this garment could not stand before God. The leaves could not cover his nakedness. Before God he was naked despite being clothed.

Then God Himself made garments of animal skins for man (Genesis 3:21). These animals had to die. This speaks symbolically of the death and shed blood of Christ, by which the sinner is saved by being clothed with “garments of salvation.”⁷¹

The believer is clothed with the righteousness of Christ and wrapped in it. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are spiritually naked and will one day stand before God in this condition, just like Adam (Revelation 20:11-15). There they will be exposed and laid bare in their sin, because they have no “robe of righteousness.” That is why they are lost and go into eternal torment.

The short parenthetical clause is a solemn warning to all who are Christians in appearance and have adopted only an outward form of being a Christian. At the coming of the Lord it will become evident that they have not put on the garments of salvation, which is the only thing that can stand before God. For them the day before the throne of God is coming, when everything will be revealed. Then there will be no more pretense and no more covering up; everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of God (Hebrews 4:13).

The text continues with the words:

*“For we who are in the tent indeed groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life”
(2 Corinthians 5:4).*

Being “unclothed” is the taking down (v. 1) of the earthly tent through death. Although death has become our servant through the resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:22-23), to bring us to Christ in paradise, Paul did not want to be unclothed (to die) but to be further clothed (to be changed), so as to exchange the mortal body for the eternal and heavenly body.

71. Isaiah 61:10; Luke 15:22; Galatians 3:27; Revelation 3:17-18.

Even on their deathbeds, children of God have still waited for the coming of Christ in the very hour of their death. Believers do not wait for death.⁷² Their hope consists in waiting for Jesus Christ from heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10), in order then to be changed. That is why Paul prefers to experience the coming of Christ before his death.

“But the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Corinthians 5:5).

Looking into the future, and the expectation connected with it, is not an uncertain matter for us. God meets us in our weakness and gives us, who can be assailed by doubts, a guarantee and a pledge. He commits Himself to fulfill His promise. He has given us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee (or down payment) (2 Corinthians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 4:8).

If God did not change us or raise us, He would lose the guarantee, which is the Holy Spirit! That is exactly what this word is saying! The Spirit will be with us forever (John 14:16); even after death He dwells in us (Romans 8:2, 11). This truth clearly speaks for a life after death.

The bodies of believers are the temple of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 John 4:13) and will remain so for eternity. The Holy Spirit does not give up the bodies of the saints in which He has dwelt (Romans 8:11). He Himself will take part in God’s work in the resurrection and transformation of the mortal bodies.

2.4.5 The Journey and the Home

“So we are always of good courage and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6).

Possessing the guarantee lets us always be of good courage, because it is the guarantee that everything mortal in us will soon be swallowed up by life.

Here the third image is introduced: staying in a foreign land and living at home. We know that while we are in the body we are not with the Lord, where we really belong. That is why our stay in a foreign land can only be of limited duration. The word “at home” here means living in the body or having our

72. On the other hand, the following verses show that alongside the hope of Christ’s coming there is the confidence of being with the Lord after dying. Alongside the hope of Christ’s coming, this is an equally great comfort.

home in the body. Being away from the Lord, on the other hand, means that we are in a foreign land, that is, in the world, where we are sojourners and exiles (1 Peter 2:11).

This statement is revealing for the state after death. This contrast means that there are only these two states or places of residence. No intermediate phase between these two states is mentioned here. Some think that this phase is not consciously experienced and would therefore not exist subjectively (that is, in one's own experience). From these verses, however, it becomes clear that an unconscious intermediate state, no matter what it might look like, does not exist objectively. And how could one long for such a state?

The believer can be either in the body or with the Lord; *there is no other possibility*. That is exactly why we can be of good courage.

“(for we walk by faith, not by sight)” (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Because these are invisible and therefore eternal things, this truth (v. 6) can only be recognized and understood by faith (Hebrews 11:1). The heavenly home can only be grasped by faith (Hebrews 11:13-15). That is why this verse shows us an extremely important principle for our life as Christians, who are strangers on the way home. Our hope is a matter of faith: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?” (Romans 8:24).

The believer needs no reports of near-death experiences or of what patients have experienced while dying. Believers rely solely on the reliable Word of God. They need not let themselves be unsettled by such reports.

“but we are of good courage and would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).

In this verse the statement of verse 6 is reversed. Paul would much rather be away from the body, because he knew that then we are immediately at home, that is, at home with the Lord. This verse is a key verse for understanding the state after death.

So when one has died and is no longer in the body, one is at home with the Lord. This means that body and spirit-soul are separated. How else could one be outside the body and at home with the Lord at the same time?

“Away from the body” is at the same time a condition of being a stranger, because the spirit-soul or the inner man is separated from the body. That is an

imperfect state that was not originally intended. God created man as a unity, as a spirit-soul-body personality. Even if this unity no longer exists through death, it will nevertheless be restored in the resurrection. That is why “away from the body” does not refer to the risen believers, because they have a resurrection body and are therefore not away from the body. The state described here applies only to the believers who have fallen asleep.

When it comes to choosing, at the present moment, between the foreign land and home – that is, to reaching Christ by the quickest possible way – Paul would rather die in order to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23). If Paul had been able to choose in what way he should be clothed with the eternal house, then of course he did not want to be unclothed (to die) but to be further clothed (to be changed) (v. 4).

“Therefore we also make it our aim, whether at home or away, to be pleasing to him. For we must all be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what he has done in the body, according to what he has practiced, whether good or evil” (5:9-10).

For all our longing for home and all our expectation of soon being there, one important fact must not be forgotten. In eternity only what we have done in the body to please the Lord will count. This will be made manifest before the judgment seat of Christ. Everything else, which had no value for Him, will not stand there and will not be rewarded (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). In those moments we ourselves will see our whole life through the eyes of Christ and be brought into complete agreement with His verdict on our deeds. The question of redemption need no longer be dealt with there, for it was settled long ago. Here it is solely a matter of assessing our works.

Paul says that we should strive with all our strength to live for the glory of God, whether we are at home in the body (v. 6) or away from the Lord (v. 8). Both apply only to our life on earth. There we should strive to do good to God’s pleasure. The time is coming when this will no longer be possible in this unique and unrepeatable form in the body, as is now the case on earth, and when it can no longer be made up for.

2.4.6 Other Interpretations

The reader should not be left unaware that there are different interpretations of this passage, which are also used to try to support the view refuted in this book.

The Building from God – Only the Resurrection Body

A widespread interpretation holds that the building refers exclusively to the resurrection body and not to a state after death and before the resurrection. Here the earthly tent is understood exclusively as the body. When this is destroyed by death, God will give us a new body that He Himself has formed and that will never again be destroyed. Moreover, this body is heavenly because we will live in heaven with it.

I agree with this view in principle, but I nevertheless see in the words “we have a building from God” a provision of God directly for the moment when we die. Immediately after the tent is taken down, a new house stands ready. That is not yet the resurrection body, because the resurrection does not yet take place then. It is the state after death until the resurrection that is a part of the building from God. It is therefore also natural to include this intermediate state here, because Paul mentions it directly in verse 8, and in the same context: outside the body the believer can only be with the Lord; there is no other place or state. That is why it is not about two kinds of bodies but about two kinds of life, two kinds of existence, the earthly and the heavenly.

The Building from God – a Spiritual Body for the Intermediate State

Is this “building from God” a body that is available for the intermediate state? At least two reasons speak against this. First, it is said of this building that it is eternal. But the intermediate state is not eternal; it will definitely end with the resurrection. Second, we find no passage of Scripture dealing with this state in which a special body for this time is described. No body is required for the intermediate state, for during this time the spirit-soul is visible like a person in the body on earth (Revelation 6:9-11). Scripture tells us nothing more about the nature of the intermediate state.

The Building from God – Heaven, the Father’s House

Some interpreters understand the “building from God” as the Father’s house (John 14:2), our heavenly homeland (Philippians 3:20). But the “building from God” and the “heavens” are clearly distinguished. The heavens here are the place where we will be, and in that sense one could speak of them as the

Father's house. But "building" – and this term leads to the connection with the Father's house – describes the individual heavenly form of existence of each believer, both between death and resurrection and in the resurrection body. With this building from God we are in heaven. In other words: with this building we are in the Father's house.

'Found Naked' – Souls without a Body?

Nakedness does not describe the state of bodily death as an unconscious lingering of the soul until the day of resurrection. According to verse 1, believers have a building from God after their death, and according to verse 8 they are at home with the Lord. Although there are various ways of explaining this parenthetical clause, the alternative of a bodiless intermediate state is nevertheless ruled out. It is impossible to experience the intermediate state in the sense of Philippians 1:23 or 2 Corinthians 5:8 as cold, dreadful nakedness.

Unclothed or Clothed?

This question touches on a translation problem. A large number of translators prefer "clothed." If it really were "unclothed," nothing would change in principle in the interpretation set out above. Then the believer would be unclothed in death, that is, be without a body, and nevertheless not be found naked. "Found naked" does not refer to the body, nor to the tent, nor to the clothing. It is the result of judicial examination and aims solely at the spiritual condition of the person: either he is in Christ, and then it makes no difference whether he is in the body or outside the body; or he is without Christ, and then he is naked forever, whether in the body or in death.

Questions for Further Study

- What is the difference between the "outer" and the "inner" man?
- What three images does the apostle Paul use in 2 Corinthians 4–5?
- What solemn warning can we take from this passage?
- What can negatively affect our longing for home?

2.5 To Die Is Gain

To die is gain! This statement turns upside down everything that death means for human beings: they no longer need to fear it. Death is a cold enemy, even if in many obituaries death, especially after illness, is presented as a release. Death is anything but gain – if there were not someone who has conquered death. His victory transforms even death into gain.

That is God's wisdom! God can reverse everything and turn it into blessing. Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Romans 5:20)! In the story of Samson we find a beautiful picture of this: he killed the lion, and a swarm of bees settled in the carcass and produced honey: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judges 14:14). Death is like a beast of prey that tears and devours, but out of the slain beast comes honey that refreshes and revives people. Paul knew the victor over death:

"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if to live in the flesh is my lot – that is worth the effort for me, and which I shall choose I do not know. But I am hard pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake" (Philippians 1:21-24).

These verses are among the clearest statements of Holy Scripture about the state after death.

When Paul wrote these words, he was in prison (Philippians 1:13). Would he leave this dungeon alive again? It was possible that he would be sentenced to death. Out of this situation he wrote down some thoughts about what he felt in the face of death, what he expected and what moved him.

Up to that moment Christ had been the only goal and the content of his life. From the moment he had met Him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), there was simply nothing else for him but Christ and His cause. From this encounter on, Paul no longer regarded his own life as something valuable in itself, but wanted to complete the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:24). He was even ready to die as a martyr, if only that served to honor Christ (v. 20).

In doing so, Paul realized that a martyr's death not only serves to glorify Christ but is also a personal gain for him. He shows what dying would bring him personally. His life in the flesh was already filled with Christ. But his death would mean an additional gain beyond that. This gain would surpass even his life's motto, "to me to live is Christ." For him death was not only the end of a life filled with Christ but the passage to something far better.

Only when Christ fills our life is death a gain for us. For the person without Christ, death is the bitter, inescapable end and the finish of his own self-determined life. In a word: loss. Life is lost, because without Christ it has no

permanence. Christ in the life of the believer guarantees the gain of eternal glory! Without Christ, however, a person is eternally lost – a loss that never ends.

Paul considers what he would prefer if he could determine the outcome of his imprisonment himself: either death (that is gain) or freedom (life in the flesh). He is by no means sad about remaining here, because then he can continue to serve the Lord. When he thought of the Philippians and their zeal for the gospel, he was filled with joy and gratitude. He wanted to do everything to further their faith.

So Paul was drawn by both possibilities. On the one side he saw the great personal gain, on the other side service for the Lord and the well-being of the believers. He openly admits that he cannot easily decide.

What exactly did Paul mean by gain? For him the gain consisted in departing and being with Christ. Nothing less than that would death bring him. That was far better and in no way comparable with what he had experienced until then. At his death he would instantly come into the immediate presence of his Redeemer. The whole extent of this gain lies in the few words: “be with Christ.” He longed greatly to see his Redeemer face to face. It was not rest after laborious service that attracted him – although that was also the case⁷³ – but a Person who already filled his life on earth. Here he had already come to know this Person. Unfortunately, it was the circumstances of life and, not least, the old nature, the sinful flesh, that could disturb this fellowship and intimacy with Christ. But then even that would no longer be; nothing could disturb him any longer in living with Christ. The deep fellowship with Christ that he already enjoyed here would be lived there in perfection.

The knowledge of His Person (Philippians 3:8) made him long to die, because death as a servant (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:22) would bring him to Christ. Only the knowledge of Christ Jesus can awaken the same longing in believers today.

But then Paul is again gripped by his concern for the church, and he personally comes to the certainty that he will remain for its benefit (v. 25).

73. Revelation 14:13

2.5.1 Other Explanations

Unfortunately, there are also erroneous views about these verses. It is denied that the believer is immediately with Christ after his death.

2.5.1.1 Is It the Return of Christ?

Some say that this is not about the death and dying of human beings but about the return of Christ. According to this, believers would be brought to Christ only at the return of Christ and the resurrection connected with it, in order then to be with Him. But that is only half the truth. It is true that at the coming of the Lord we will attain the perfect state in the resurrection. But this passage is neither about the return of the Lord nor about attaining the perfect final state. Paul is speaking of dying!

If this really were about the coming of the Lord, then it would be very questionable whether the Lord would come for Paul alone. The consequence would be that the Philippians would be left behind. Paul would go, and they would remain here. That is the conclusion if this were about the coming of the Lord. We hardly need to emphasize that at the coming of the Lord no believer will be left behind.

2.5.1.2 Departing

A further reason why this is not about the return of Christ and the resurrection is the word “depart.” The noun corresponding to “depart” occurs only once more in Paul, namely in 2 Timothy 4:6. There he undoubtedly uses it for his martyrdom.

In the everyday language of that time the word “depart”⁷⁴ was used to describe the loosing of the ropes and the weighing of the anchor of a ship lying in harbor that was about to put out to sea. It was also used to describe the striking of a tent camp (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:1, 4; 2 Peter 1:14) when setting out. The term also included the separation of things that belong together. With regard to death, it is the separation of the spirit-soul from the body. This last-mentioned use of the word “depart” also supports the idea that this is about death.

74. “Depart” here literally means “*to loosen up*,” “*to dissolve*.” So at death the tent and the garment of the body are, as it were, dissolved (2 Corinthians 5:1, 4).

2.5.1.3 Soul Sleep?

Some also claim that death is the beginning of soul sleep. Let us suppose for a moment that after his death Paul really would fall into soul sleep, in which he would be in a no-man's-land without any consciousness at all. How then are we to understand the words that he had the desire to depart? Did Paul want to escape his situation, run away from his task? After all, he had the desire to remain for the benefit of the Philippians and of all believers, rather than depart into a provisional nothingness. Even if, according to this view, the time after death no longer existed for him (subjectively) and therefore no time passed for him from death to resurrection, at least the time passed for the Philippians, during which they needed Paul's help and ministry. Had Paul taught soul sleep, he would probably have said that he wanted to remain so as not to lose a single hour in a useless soul sleep. He urged believers to make the best use of the time and not to sleep it away (cf. Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5)!

2.5.1.4 A Privilege Only for Paul?

Some object that not every believer can claim for himself the same as the apostle Paul. There are certainly things that belonged only to Paul and were given only to him as an apostle. But the state after death is the same for all believers, because it is a result of the finished work of Christ. He has won the victory over death for all. These blessings do not depend on a particular position or a particular office among the people of God or on special experiences, but are given to all believers in the same way and in full measure.

2.5.2 Meeting Him!

Let us close this chapter with a perspective that we want to learn from Paul. If it is now certain that all believers go to Christ when they die, what effect does that have on us? Are we ready at every moment to be called home by the Lord Jesus Christ? It is important for the believer to think about this in order to find out whether he is attached to this life with all its things or whether he is ready to give up everything at any time with a view to Christ. Precisely thinking about death brings many things in our lives to light. Would we trust the Lord to take care of our family? Would we be ready to let go? Let us never rule out, even if

we are children of God, that we can be called home through death into His heavenly kingdom at any time, at any age!

Do we already know our Savior now in such a way that on the other side we will meet not a stranger but someone we know? Not that we have already seen Him in bodily form. No, but we love Him, though we have not seen Him (1 Peter 1:8). The fellowship we may already have with Him now creates an intimate relationship with Him that we continue there. The knowledge we have gained here and what we have seen here with the eyes of faith, we take with us there.

We will be overwhelmed by Him, because then we will no longer see Him with the eyes of faith but in bodily form in all His beauty.⁷⁵ To be with Christ means to see Him as He is⁷⁶.

Questions for Further Study

- Explain why dying was gain for Paul!
- Can you personally agree with this?
- What is the precondition for this?
- How does our knowledge of Jesus Christ in this life affect our knowledge in eternity?
- Why is it wrong to speak of soul sleep?

2.6 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep

The expression “those who have fallen asleep” is another designation for people who have died. Strictly speaking, the New Testament reserves this description only for people who are united with Christ.⁷⁷

“Falling asleep” in itself is a euphemistic way of describing death. That is why it applies precisely to believers, since for them death, through Christ’s triumph over death, is a defeated enemy (Hebrews 2:14). This description is also so beautiful because sleep always lasts only a certain time. The moment of waking, that is, of rising (again), will come, and an eternal day will dawn that will never again have an evening.

75. In the figurative sense of Psalm 45:2; 1 Kings 10:7; Isaiah 33:17.

76. 1 John 3:2.

77. The word “those who have fallen asleep” occurs in the New Testament in the following passages: 1 Corinthians 15:20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; the word “fall asleep” in the following passages: Matthew 27:52; 1 Corinthians 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 51; 2 Peter 3:4. In the Old Testament the term is not limited to believers: Jeremiah 51:39, 57; Daniel 12:2.

That death is called sleep⁷⁸ is also due to the outwardly visible similarity between a sleeping person and a dead person. Sleep, however, is not only an image for death meant to soften the reality of death, but describes the real state of the dead. So this sleep already indicates that death is not the end of a person but only a temporary state. Sleep as we know it always has a certain duration. So it is, then, with those who have fallen asleep. The moment comes when they will awake from sleep, that is, rise again.

The word used for “fall asleep” is derived from the basic meaning “to lie,” “to lie down to rest,” “to sink into sleep.” Its counterpart is the resurrection, which denotes “getting up” from sleep (1 Corinthians 15:20, 51-52). Thus this sleep resembles waiting for the resurrection, which ends the intermediate state and ushers in the final state.

But “falling asleep” does not actually mean that the sleep of death begins with the onset of death, although that could be contained in the word. Rather, this expression describes the process of dying and departing. When this word is used in the New Testament, it does not mean that the dead are now sleeping, but that they die and thereby pass over into another state. Those who have fallen asleep are therefore believers who have died and have since been in another state of life.

2.6.1 Are Those Who Have Fallen Asleep in Soul Sleep?

The question regarding the state in death is what the sleep and the resurrection refer to. Does this sleep include only the body, or does it also refer to the inner man, that is, his spirit-soul? What is called soul sleep is an unconsciousness or nonconsciousness of the whole person, of believers as well as unbelievers. Some claim that this sleep is like a complete extinguishing of the person in the night of death. But this in no way explains the sleep of believers who have died or the state of the dead, as the following passages show.

First, let it be noted that a person who is asleep and whose body is at rest can at the same time experience something, for example in a dream. Although the body is not active, the subconscious can nevertheless be active. This is only meant to indicate that the image of sleeping does not mean that the sleeper has no consciousness, because he can very well experience himself and his surroundings as a personality in a dream. Just as sleep is only a different state of

78. Jeremiah 51:39; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11-14.

life from being awake, so death too is a different state of life from the earthly existence of the same person. Death is not the extinction of the existence of the person who dies, any more than bodily sleep means lifelessness of the sleeper.

2.6.2 What Does the Sleep Refer To?

Interesting in this connection is an event at the crucifixion of Jesus: "... and the earth shook, and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:51b-53).

In this verse the three terms we are examining – *resurrection*, *those who have fallen asleep* and *bodies* – are mentioned together. The three terms belong together and make clear that it is the body that sleeps and is raised. It says that the bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and as a result, of course, the whole person, including the spirit-soul, for after the resurrection of Jesus they went to Jerusalem.

There is only a resurrection of the *body* (1 Corinthians 15:35-44). When other passages say that the dead rise, and of course the whole person is meant, this shows that the whole person is brought forth again in the resurrection through the union of the resurrection body with the spirit-soul.⁷⁹

The falling asleep of these saints was death, which affects only the mortal body, but not their spirit-soul. So too it was only their body that was raised. Here too there is no other conclusion than that falling asleep and being raised refer only to the body.

So this text contains a clear indication that the state of sleep in death relates to the body of the saints. Nowhere in the New Testament is the sleep of death used for the soul or the spirit. That would also contradict the nature of the spirit-soul, because it is not bound to the body. Sleep is simply a state of the body only.

79. The New Testament clearly distinguishes between the resurrection of the body and the spiritual resurrection, in which those who are spiritually dead are made alive together with Christ, e.g., Ephesians 2:5.

2.6.3 The Example of Stephen's Death

The example of Stephen's death also makes this clear (Acts 7). He was killed by his own people – as his Lord had been some time before. In the last minutes of his life he looked into the opened heaven. There he saw Christ standing at the right hand of God, interceding as faithful High Priest for him who was in great distress. Then, as the stones of his murderers rained down on him, he prayed: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (Acts 7:59; cf. Luke 23:46). Although this death cannot be compared with peacefully falling asleep, it nevertheless says that he fell asleep. His spirit was received by the Lord Jesus to Himself in heaven. Who, in view of this description, would claim that Stephen sank into an unconscious soul sleep? Why else was the view into heaven, toward the victor over death, opened to him immediately before his death, if he then fell into an unconscious soul sleep after all? What then is the point of the request that the Lord Jesus should receive his spirit?

Stephen (that is, his spirit-soul) went to paradise when he had died, as his Lord had done. The saints and beloved of the Lord Jesus fall asleep in Him, “in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:18). So, like Stephen, they are welcomed and received by Him Himself, so that they may be with Him forever – first as those who have fallen asleep, and then one day as those who have risen.

2.6.4 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep at the Rapture

The Rapture into heaven is the hope of believers. The Lord Jesus Himself comes to bring His people into heaven. The Thessalonians had held fast to this hope with steadfastness (1 Thessalonians 1:3). But they must rightly have asked what would happen to their brothers and sisters in the faith who had fallen asleep, if they, the living, were caught up. Paul encourages them and says that they should not grieve like the rest, who have no hope, for:

“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so also God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

No less than the living God Himself, to whom they had turned, has taken care of those who have fallen asleep. He will entrust them to His Son when He comes from heaven for the Rapture. They had fallen asleep in Him, in Jesus, the

Son of God, and so they would in turn come with Him. Then what verse 16 says will happen:

“For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

In other words: Jesus brings those who have fallen asleep with Him from heaven, and then those who have fallen asleep, the dead in Christ, will rise.⁸⁰

Here we see how the spirit-soul of those who have fallen asleep

was with Jesus Christ in heaven and is then brought along by Him in order to be united with the body in the resurrection.⁸¹ So this word too confirms that the resurrection is the union of the spirit-soul with the body.

2.6.5 Those Who Have Fallen Asleep before the Rapture

Now that the Thessalonians had been reassured that their brothers and sisters who had fallen asleep would be present, just like themselves, the living, at the glorious event of the Rapture, Paul now also let them know where those who have fallen asleep are until the Rapture:

“For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him” (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10).

A magnificent word that sums up in brief the whole wealth of Christians! We were chosen for salvation before all time, and through the work of Christ this will actually be our portion. Salvation has brought us to the point of now living together with Christ forever.

In this verse “being awake” means living on earth; and consequently “sleeping” means having died or fallen asleep as a believer.^{82, 83} Paul says that in both states it is the case that we will live together with Christ. This means that

80. Another interpretation explains this verse to mean that Christ, at His coming in power and glory, will “bring with Him” from heaven those who have fallen asleep, after they have been caught up there at their resurrection.

81. This is also how one can understand the origin of the human being. Procreation brings the body, the outer man, into being, but God sends or forms the spirit within him (Zechariah 12:1; Psalm 33:15; 104:30).

82. Those who sleep here are not the persons of 5:4-7, because they will never live with Christ. They do not know Christ, because they are sons of the night and are in darkness. He will come upon them like a thief, and that is why His coming will mean judgment for them.

83. This is perhaps the only time that “sleep” denotes the state of believers who have died.

the body sleeps while the spirit-soul is with Christ. So Paul leaves no more questions open regarding those who have fallen asleep.

In Christ we not only have life but also live “with him.” The former is, of course, the precondition for the latter. Here it means a conscious togetherness. The living already experience this connection and fellowship in faith today, and so do those who have fallen asleep; and soon both these groups will experience it as those who have risen.

This verse describes the future, eternal aspect that the living and those who have fallen asleep will in the same way be with the Lord forever, that is, will live together with Him, in order then, a short time later, also to appear publicly together with Him (2 Thessalonians 1:10; Colossians 3:4).

2.6.6 Conclusion

So the falling asleep and sleeping of believers never means soul sleep. It describes solely and exclusively the process of dying and the state of the human and mortal body until the time of resurrection.

Questions for Further Study

- Why does the term “fall asleep” refer only to the body?
- What was the Thessalonians’ concern about their dead, and how does Paul encourage them?

2.7 Christ – Ruler over the Living and the Dead

The fact that Christ rules over the living and the dead is a key word in Romans 14. That chapter is about believers who have different views and practices in matters for which there is no explicit commandment of the Lord, where therefore each child of God is personally responsible to his Lord. Everything a believer does is directed toward his Lord, to whom he belongs. “For none of us lives to himself,” says Paul, and he adds for emphasis: “and none of us dies to himself” (v. 7). Even in death, whose timing we do not determine, he has his goal in Christ. Paul repeats this truth once more:

“For if we live, we live to the Lord; if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (v. 8).

We live our life for Him, and in our death we die for Him. This is founded on the fact that we belong to the Lord. We belong to Him in our everyday life and

in death. In death we are not lost to Him, for even then we are His possession. How wonderful! We have been included in the all-embracing counsel of God, which has His Son as its center:

"For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might rule over both the dead and the living!" (Romans 14:9).

It was God's counsel before all time to subject everything to His Son (Ephesians 1:9-10, 21-22). As Creator of all things, the Son, who is God, necessarily always had everything subject to Him (Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2-3). And yet everything was also to be subjected to Him as man.⁸⁴ Because the Lord Jesus accomplished the work of redemption and tasted death for everything (Hebrews 2:9), and in doing so perfectly glorified God, He was exalted as man above all things. He now sits on the throne of God at the right hand of the Father.⁸⁵ There He waits for the time when all enemies will lie at His feet, for He has not yet publicly taken up His rule in the world (Hebrews 1:3; 10:12-13). He is still the rejected one. God is still granting a time of grace now, and with it the opportunity to submit to the Son of God during this time, to acknowledge His authority and to serve Him.

The children of God already acknowledge the lordship of Jesus now. They serve Him and follow Him (2 Corinthians 5:15; Acts 17:7). But for all other people, too, the time will come when they must acknowledge the lordship of Jesus. Then they will be compelled to do so, because the time to do it voluntarily will be over. Then no one will be asked any longer whether he is willing or not, for God wants His Son to be honored by all (Philippians 2:9-11; John 5:23).

Christ's claim and authority to rule extend beyond the realm visible to human beings and beyond earthly life. The dead, too, cannot escape His rule. Hades (the realm of the dead) is likewise subject to Him. This is how the glorified Christ meets the apostle John:

"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. And he laid his right hand on me and said: Fear not! I am the First and the Last and the Living One, and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

84. Cf., e.g., Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:5-9; 1 Corinthians 15:25-28.

85. Hebrews 8:1; 12:2; Revelation 3:21.

Here the Lord Jesus presents Himself as the One to whom death and Hades are subject. For whoever has the keys has the power (Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 16:19). What does Christ's rule over the living and the dead mean, in what way are they subject to Him, and since when has He ruled over them?

The expression "to rule" is the same as in Luke 22:25, where it says that the kings of the nations "lord it over" them and exercise authority over them. Rule presupposes subjects who are subject to the power of the ruler and must bow to this authority. In Romans 14:9 these subjects are the living and the dead.

When did the Lord Jesus take up His rule? It has already been indicated that the all-embracing rule will only begin in the future, for we do not yet see everything subjected to Him (Hebrews 2:8). Among the living, Christ's rule is limited to believers, for unbelievers do not submit to the Son of God. From the context of Romans 14 it becomes clear that every believer (normally) places his life under the Lord and is responsible to Him alone (vv. 7-8, 12). Believers belong to their Lord throughout their whole life and also in death. So, as far as believers are concerned, Christ's rule has already begun, ever since there have been believers who submit to Christ. In the provisional and hidden form of the kingdom of God, the King, who is still rejected now, exercises His government "in exile" over believers (v. 17; Colossians 1:13).

In verse 9, however, the dead are named before the living, and the same applies to them. He also rules over them, in that they are in His power. Every person who dies is confronted immediately after his death with the fact that Christ is Lord. It says that those "under the earth" too – that is, the dead who are in Hades – must bow their knees to confess that Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). For the unbeliever this means judgment, for the question of sin has not been settled. They go into eternity without being reconciled to God (Hebrews 9:27). They are irrevocably lost. After death the deceased can no longer live his own life; he must then finally bow to the authority of Christ.

Rule over the dead, whether believers or unbelievers, of course only seems understandable if it is also felt. That in turn absolutely presupposes the full consciousness of those who have died and fallen asleep. If they had no consciousness or were in unconscious soul sleep, there would also be no rule of Christ over the dead.

Only in this life can one resist the rule of Christ. After death there is no more resistance. Every person who dies is awaited by the Living and True One.

But there is a decisive difference. This Lord, who is the Judge for the lost, meets believers as the One who loves them and died for them. That is why believers, like Paul, can look forward with good courage to the moment when through death they go to their beloved Lord, to be with Him in paradise (Philippians 1:23).

Their hope is not death but the return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:13-18), but death brings them to their Lord even before that. For those who have fallen asleep, the rule of Christ means joy, peace and inexpressible blessedness. The Lord Jesus Christ holds in His hand not only the living believers but also those who have fallen asleep until the resurrection, so as not to lose them, for that is the will of His Father (John 6:39; 10:29). Not even death can separate the believer from the love of God and the love of Christ (Romans 8:38-39)!

Scripture does not say much about what Christ's rule over unbelievers who have died consists of.⁸⁶ Peter gives a hint when he calls the place where unbelievers who have died are kept a "prison" (1 Peter 3:19-20). A prison presupposes persons and authorities who have the power to put people in custody. This prison, Hades, has been placed under the authority of Christ as the glorified man (Revelation 1:18). The unbelievers who have died are held there by Him and kept until the day of judgment (2 Peter 2:9) before the great white throne (Revelation 20:11-15).

The one group is kept in the presence of their Lord until the resurrection (like Lazarus in Abraham's bosom); the others are held captive until the sentence is pronounced before the great white throne (like the rich man in Hades).

The Lord's rule is not limited to the one-time exercise and display of His power in the resurrection, when He will call the dead out of their graves (John

86. One may rightly ask what it was like in Sheol (the realm of the dead) before Christ took over the rule. What was different? Was there no Hades and no paradise before? From the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16) it emerges that Hades and paradise already existed before the death and resurrection of Christ. Only after the death of Christ is it said that believers are with Him. Paradise is called "Abraham's bosom" and is not marked by the presence of the glorified man Christ (nor can it be). Nevertheless it is a place and state of blessing. Whether there was a change for these believers before and after the death of Christ, we do not know. The believers of all ages who have died, however, have experienced the presence of Christ since His death and resurrection, since He was in paradise when He died. Since that time "being in paradise" means being with Christ (Philippians 1:23). We cannot say more on this question, because Scripture says no more about it. Unbelievers will not see Jesus Christ (until the judgment at the white throne). They are not with Him. But to all the dead who have died in their sins it will – so I believe – be made tangibly clear that Christ rules over the dead even now.

5:28-29). It means a fundamental and lasting subjection that began when Christ ascended the throne of God.

In summary, we can conclude that Christ's rule over the dead presupposes a conscious continuing life of the spirit-soul personality after death.

Questions for Further Study

- How can Christ's rule be explained or distinguished:
- among believers on the one hand and unbelievers on the other?
- before and after death?
- What does a conscious life under the rule of Christ look like?

2.8 The Souls under the Altar

The book of Revelation unveils to us the completion of God's ways with creation and also gives us information about the state of human beings after death. In this, the book agrees exactly with what has already been worked out from other parts of the New Testament.

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" (Revelation 6:9-11).

In examining this text, we limit ourselves to the following questions:

- Who are the souls under the altar?
- Where are the souls?
- At what time does this event take place?

2.8.1 The Souls of the Martyrs

Here John sees the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. Why does he speak here of the souls of the martyrs and not simply of martyrs? What is the difference?

The soul is the part of a martyr that lives on after death.⁸⁷ The murderers have power only to kill the body, but not the soul. The Lord Jesus gives this fact as comfort to those who are killed for His name's sake:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

This is about such persons. They themselves were killed for the sake of the word of God, but not their souls. Here the Lord Jesus explicitly distinguishes soul and body. The soul is immortal and cannot be killed, in contrast to the body, which can be killed. That is why the term "souls" here implies that life in the earthly body has been ended by death, but is continued without interruption – outside the body – in another world. John sees the souls, but not the earthly bodies of flesh and blood, for these have remained on earth.⁸⁸

In 6:9 and 20:4 the souls clearly stand for the persons of the martyrs. This becomes clear from the fact that they speak and are spoken to. A real conversation takes place that is not symbolic. A conversation presupposes full consciousness and active mental faculties, which these souls obviously possess. Thus the personality of the martyrs has been fully preserved after their death, with all the characteristics essential to a human personality.

John *saw* the souls. What did John see, then, if the souls no longer have a body? It is obvious that John saw human forms, which he identified as martyrs. Only human forms can receive a (white) robe that they can put on and wear.⁸⁹

So the souls have a "body" that is distinct from the earthly body and also from the body in the resurrection (for that has not yet taken place). By this we do not mean a special spiritual body created specifically for the time of the intermediate state, but the preservation of individuality, which also includes the recognizability of the person after death and before the resurrection. The soul is the person, and in this intermediate state it is so in such a way that it presents itself in the hereafter in a visible body. The "appearance" of the soul in the

87. Cf. section 3.2.

88. The meaning of the term "soul" varies in Revelation. The Greek word *psychē* is used seven times: 6:9 (persons of the martyrs); 8:9; 12:11 (life, i.e., earthly existence); 16:3 (all living creatures in the sea); 18:13, 14 (human soul, soul); 20:4 (same meaning as 6:9). An important principle for interpreting Scripture is that the context of a text is decisive for the meaning of a term. As a first step it is of course interesting to explore how the writers themselves used the terms, before then examining their use by other writers.

89. Revelation is full of symbolism, but not everything has to be interpreted symbolically. This is about real persons who were killed and are in a real place.

hereafter is connected with earthly bodily existence, for otherwise there would be no recognizability in heaven. For us in this world that is unimaginable. We simply note that here the dead have full consciousness and are even perceived as persons.

Recognizability also becomes clear in the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8). There these two men appear personally in human form (otherwise Peter would hardly have had the idea of building tents for them). It should be borne in mind that Moses and Elijah had no resurrection body, because the resurrection has not yet taken place. Their appearance corresponds to the state after death until the resurrection.⁹⁰

At this point we mention once again that the term “soul” here can hardly be rendered as the “life” of the body. What, then, would John have seen under the altar? So when the term soul is used in this context, it is about the recognizability of the person. That is precisely why the word “soul” is used in Revelation 6:9 and 20:4, because it is about the recognizability of these departed ones, which also depends on bodily existence. After death the personality of the human being and its form – that is, the appearance that is peculiar to the person and characterizes him – are preserved.

To summarize: the souls here are persons who have died and are in heaven outside the body in full consciousness (that is, not in soul sleep).

That heaven is the dwelling place of the souls will be shown in the next section.

2.8.2 Under the Altar

The souls are seen “under the altar.” This expression is closely connected with the fact that they sacrificed their lives for the sake of the word of God. The circumstance that they are “under” the altar recalls a similar situation in the Old Testament. There the blood of some sacrificial animals was poured out at the base of the bronze altar of burnt offering (Exodus 29:12; Leviticus 4:7-34). The soul is in the blood (Leviticus 17:10-14). A person’s death can therefore also be described as the pouring out of the soul (Psalm 141:8; Isaiah 53:12). In the New

90. I am aware that this appearance is an exception, and therefore one cannot derive from it what is then valid for all. I simply note that this exception can be conclusively explained on the basis of all the other statements of the Bible.

Testament, sacrifice is a familiar image for giving one's life for God (Philippians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:6; Romans 12:1).

The altar occurs eight times in Revelation: 6:9; 8:3 (twice), 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7. In Revelation, unlike the Old Testament, two altars (the bronze altar of burnt offering and the altar of incense) are not distinguished, although in some places one can think of the bronze altar of burnt offering (6:9; 16:7) and in others of the golden altar of incense (8:3; 9:13).

The location of the altar is defined very precisely.

- It is in the temple that is in heaven: "And another angel came out of the temple that is in heaven ... And another angel, who had authority over the fire, came out from the altar" (14:17-18).
- It stands before the throne of God: "Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God ... And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to give power to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne" (8:2-3).
- It stands in the immediate presence of God: "And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God" (9:13).

This makes clear where the souls of the martyrs are. They are in the immediate presence of God. This place corresponds to paradise, where the Lord Jesus went when He gave His spirit into the hands of the Father after He had died on the cross (Luke 23:43, 46). The Lord went into the immediate presence of God, to His Father. Paul was caught up into the same "heavenly paradise," where he heard inexpressible words (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

What do the souls under the altar do? They were told to rest a little while. That is not the rest of soul sleep and not an unconscious existence, but a conscious state in which rest is enjoyed as soothing blessedness. It says explicitly:

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! Yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors, for their works follow them" (Revelation 14:13).

For them the time of toil and labor is over. They enjoy being allowed to rest in the presence of God. The connection of the souls with the altar also permits the conclusion that it is a place of worship (Revelation 8:3). Beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ, the saints will worship in wonder.

We repeat: the souls are before the throne of God in His immediate presence and rest from their works. They behold the glory of God and pay Him homage.

Here we note a striking agreement between the dwelling place of the saints who have fallen asleep and the other statements of the New Testament, which, given the unity of Scripture, is only to be expected. Without exception, we find all the saints who have fallen asleep in the place the Lord Jesus calls paradise. They are with Christ and are at home there, that is, at home with the Lord.

2.8.3 When Does This Event Take Place?

We come back once more to the fact that the souls are dead people who are still in the state of death. It says that they had been slain (v. 9), that their blood had been shed (v. 10) and that they had been killed (v. 11). They are under the altar. They are not called “brothers” – like the fellow servants who are still alive (v. 11b) – but “souls,” because they have not yet risen. The resurrection of these martyrs has not yet taken place at the time of the opening of the fifth seal (6:9).

Why do we believe that the resurrection has not yet taken place? They cry out for vengeance for the wrong done to them. This demand is not met immediately. They are told to wait a little while, until their brothers who are still on earth have likewise completed their lives through martyrdom. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself will avenge the blood of His servants (19:2) at His appearing in power. Only at the appearing of Christ will the resurrection take place (20:4). Consequently it has not taken place until then, since the brothers are still on earth and are being persecuted.

So from the few clues mentioned under the fifth seal we can conclude that the resurrection of the brothers and the coming of Christ have not yet taken place. The scene in 6:9-11 describes the state of the soul after death.

2.8.4 The Cry for Vengeance

Now we come back once more to the souls’ cry for vengeance. Those who deny a conscious life after death do not understand these words as spoken personally but explain them purely symbolically (cf. Genesis 4:10; James 5:4; Luke 19:40). They also argue that Christians never cry out for vengeance, because they want to follow the example of Christ, who even on the cross prayed for His

murderers. Therefore, they say, the blood can demand vengeance only symbolically, just like the blood of Abel.

It is indeed remarkable that the souls demand vengeance and thus in fact do not correspond to the Christian attitude. However, they would only be denying the Christian attitude if they were Christians. The solution to this question depends on how one interprets Revelation historically. This concerns above all the question whether we Christians, historically speaking, stand at the beginning of Revelation, in the middle of it, or already at its end. Without being able to go into this in detail here, I briefly set out the historical or prophetic framework as I understand it.

According to the division in Revelation 1:19, the seven letters give a prophetic overview of the history of the Christian church from its beginning to its end. Accordingly, from chapter 4 on, born-again Christians are no longer on earth but in heaven. There the Christians, together with the believers from the time of the Old Testament, are represented as glorified believers in the 24 elders.

After the Christians are in heaven, people both from Israel (Revelation 7:3-8) and from the nations (Revelation 7:9-12) will come to faith. This means, then, that the souls under the altar are not Christians and do not belong to the church of God either. The souls under the altar believed the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, which will be proclaimed after the Rapture of the church (Matthew 24:14). They are killed for their faith. Their cry for vengeance is typically Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:43; 2 Kings 9:7; Psalm 79:10) and not Christian. It is therefore not necessary to understand the cry for vengeance symbolically, for it corresponds to the understanding and position of believers in the Tribulation period.

Questions for Further Study

- In what way can the account of the “souls under the altar” be a comfort to us?
- Why are these saints who have died?
- What body do they have?

2.9 Eternal Life

When one deals with the state of human beings after death, in the resurrection or in eternity, one almost inevitably comes across what the Bible calls “eternal

life.”⁹¹ Not least, eternal life, as a unique element of the Christian message, stands in contrast to death and transience. What would a person pay if he could acquire this life; what would he not give to possess it! Through the Son of God we can actually receive this life – and without paying. That is why, in connection with eternal life, we can speak only of believers. Only they have eternal life, because they believe in the Son of God and submit to Him.⁹² They possess eternal life as God’s gift of grace (Romans 6:23).

What significance does eternal life have with regard to the death of the believer? Could it be that he gives up or loses eternal life in death and receives it anew in the resurrection?

Before we examine this question, we must first clarify what eternal life actually is.

2.9.1 What Is Eternal Life?

Nothing and no one is eternal except God. He is the Eternal One, who has neither beginning nor end (Genesis 21:33; Isaiah 40:28; Romans 16:26). That is why eternal life is the life of the eternal God Himself. Of the eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, it says: “He is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). He testifies of Himself: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6; cf. 11:25). Eternal life is personified in the Son. He has life in Himself (John 1:4) and was therefore the only one who could reveal it. “Eternal life is the conscious, thinking, willing, feeling, knowing, loving life of God Himself.”⁹³

Another characteristic of God is closely connected with this life: God dwells in heaven (Psalm 115:3; Matthew 6:9, among others), and therefore eternal life is the life of heaven. That is where it is at home. This life does not belong to the sphere of the natural life of this creation. It belongs to another world that lies beyond the range of the human senses (2 Corinthians 4:18).

It is in this sense that Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about eternal life. He calls it “heavenly things” (John 3:12). Eternal life is life in the Father’s house (John

91. All the passages in the New Testament that speak of eternal life are Matthew 19:16, 29; 25:46; Mark 10:17, 30; Luke 10:25; 18:30; John 3:15, 16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 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; 6:12; Titus 1:2; 3:7; 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 21.

92. John 3:16, 36; 6:40, 47, 54; 10:28; 11:25; 1 John 5:13.

93. W.J. Ouweeneel, *Das ewige Leben*, Neustadt (Ernst-Paulus Verlag), 1980; p. 9.

14:3), marked by the fellowship (1 John 1:2-3) and love (John 17:24) of the Father and the Son.

Eternal life is the epitome of the fullness of heavenly blessing (Ephesians 1:3) and of the spiritual riches that have been given to believers in Christ. This includes their having been brought into the fellowship of the Father and the Son (1 John 1:1-4; John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:9). They already possess eternal life now; they are not waiting to receive it in the future (John 3:36; 5:24).

2.9.2 Eternal Life and Immortality

These terms are often confused, as if eternal life and immortality were one and the same thing. That is a great error. From the remarks above it becomes clear that eternal life does not primarily involve a duration of time or the length of life (quantity), but describes the “quality” of life. The quality of eternal life consists in its being the life of the eternal God, who dwells in heaven. This life brings with it the whole fullness of God that is in the Son. It is the life enjoyed in the Father’s house, where the triune God has dwelt from all eternity.

That is why it is not enough to equate eternal life with immortality or eternal existence.⁹⁴ Of course eternal life also includes immortality; otherwise it would not be “eternal” life. But the meaning of eternal life goes far beyond the aspect of time.

If “eternal life” and “immortality” are used synonymously, the wrong conclusion could easily be drawn that unbelieving people, who do not possess eternal life, have no eternal existence. But eternal existence does not depend on possessing eternal life.

Once more: eternal life is not only a life that never ends, but a completely different life. The unbeliever does not possess this life. John makes this clear when he speaks of those who will not see “[eternal] life.” The wrath of God remains on them (John 3:36). But the wrath of God is not exhausted in the person being annihilated, with eternal death as the consequence. The wrath of God is directed against responsible creatures and can therefore only “remain” forever on people who also exist always, that is, eternally. This verse makes clear that there is a great difference between eternal life and eternal existence.

94. The reader can try for himself reading “immortality” instead of “eternal life.” He will quickly notice that in very few cases are the terms interchangeable.

2.9.3 How Can a Person Receive the Life of God?

Human beings could not receive eternal life, the life of God, unless God Himself became man. That is exactly what happened. The apostle John says concerning the word of life, which is Christ Himself: “and the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” (1 John 1:2).

Christ is the Word (*logos*) of life, that is, the perfect expression and revelation of life, because in Him is life (John 1:4; 14:6). He has life in Himself as man, and so He can impart it to human beings (John 5:26). The Word became flesh to bring life to the world, because human beings lay in death (John 5:24; Ephesians 2:1). Spiritual death was the consequence of sin. That is why the Son of God had to become the atonement for our sins (1 John 4:9-10), so that we could receive life.

It is “spiritual” life that those receive who are spiritually dead in their sins (Colossians 2:13). They receive life as the gift of God when they believe in the name of the Son of God (1 John 5:13). For this, God’s intervention through the new birth is necessary, since a person cannot bring about this birth by himself (John 1:13). With the new birth, the story of the spiritual life of such people begins, never to end again.

This life becomes their possession, so that they have it in themselves (John 6:53; 1 John 3:15). At the same time it says that they have it in the Son (1 John 5:11), because they can possess it only in dependence on Him, the source of life. They cannot have it apart from Him. In this way they become “partakers” of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), just as a leaf can only be fresh and green on the branch.

2.9.4 How Do Believers Possess Eternal Life?

The life that believers have received through the new birth (John 3; 1 Peter 1:23-25) and possess before God is “eternal life.” This means that this life is not merely a component of believers that could (for whatever reason) become detached from them again. It is not like a valuable gift that one may possibly lose again. Eternal life has become the life of believers; it is their state and their new existence before God in Christ. Paul describes this new existence as those

who are alive from the dead as a new creation,⁹⁵ as the work of God.⁹⁶ By receiving the new life, the sinner becomes a new man.

To illustrate what has been said above: we do not carry our natural life (Greek: *bios*) around with us like a package that can be lost without consequences. Whoever loses it dies. Natural life simply means our whole earthly being, which is ended by bodily death. The way in which we possess eternal life is comparable to this. If eternal life could be lost, the new creation would thereby be destroyed. But exactly the opposite is the case. The new creation can no longer be destroyed, because it is God's work in Christ Jesus.

Life on earth involves a conscious existence that makes a human being a personality. It is the ability to express oneself, the power to think, to feel, to know, to love. We can transfer these characteristics of earthly life to eternal life. Just as natural life makes a human being a personality, so Paul speaks of a new personality, of a new "I." "... it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). The believer possesses the new life in a way that makes him a new personality. That is why we can now be imitators of God, because we have His life and His nature. The power of this life is the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us just as eternal life has.

Death no longer has any influence on this state and this existence, because eternal life naturally cannot die.

Having now marked out the nature, the meaning and the scope of eternal life, we now turn to our original question.

2.9.5 Eternal Life and Death

What happens to eternal life when the believer dies? What significance does eternal life have for those who have fallen asleep? That is the core question with regard to the state of believers after death.

The Lord Jesus gives a clear answer to this question: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). The fact that the Lord Jesus Christ in His Person is the resurrection and the life has far-

95. Eternal life is of course not a creation, but the fact that believers now possess it and that it characterizes their new state can be regarded as part of the new creation.

96. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:5, 10; 4:23-24; Colossians 3:9-11.

reaching and blessed consequences for believers – both the living and those who have died.

2.9.6 Believers Who Have Died

What does the Lord's word mean for believers who have died, that He

- is the resurrection?
- is the life?

They will live, because they will one day rise again. We have already seen earlier that this means the bodily resurrection. Because He is the resurrection, it means the end of their bodily death and their re-entry into life. That is the hope of resurrection, which is founded on His Person, His atoning work and His resurrection. Eternal life is the guarantee that the body will be raised. Then the body too will share fully in eternal life.

They will live, even though they die: this describes the state of the believer immediately after death. When the believer dies, life remains with all the characteristics of eternal life (see section 2.9.4). Eternal life is not touched by death; it passes untouched through the "gate of death." Concretely, this means that the new life, that is, the new "I" of the believer, the personal consciousness of the new man, continues to exist even after death. Eternal life is inseparably connected with the believer.

In this connection it becomes clear once again that eternal life can never again be separated from the believer. Even when he dies, he lives on in the power and consciousness of this life. The fellowship with the Father and the Son, which only became possible through eternal life, is not interrupted.

2.9.7 Believers Who Are Alive

In John 11:26 the Lord says what it means for the living that He is the resurrection and the life: the living will never die. The Lord expresses this truth twice more elsewhere: "This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:58); and "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:51).

It is remarkable that in the first part of the verse in John 11:26 the Lord speaks of believers who have died, although in the second part He says that

believers no longer die at all. Yet the believer still dies just like the unbeliever. Is that a contradiction? In the second part of the verse, death has a different aspect. The death of believers and the death of unbelievers are not the same. The believer who dies will not see the eternal death that the unbeliever faces after his bodily death. Bodily death leads the sinner toward eternal judgment, which is eternal death (Revelation 20:14), for “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Nothing remains for the sinner but death and judgment. For him there is no more hope and no more help. That is the death of the unbeliever!

The believer will not die this death of the sinner. The effect of sin on human beings (death) has been completely abolished for believers through the resurrection of Christ. They already now have a new nature that can no longer die – even if they must still pass through bodily death. It is the life of the One who overcame death in the power of divine life. Because He is the resurrection, it is a life over which death no longer has any power.

The believer, whether he is alive or has died, *always* lives in the power and consciousness of eternal life. Through death the body is excluded from it only for a certain time.

Summary: eternal life is the believer’s possession in three different periods of time in which he finds himself. It begins during his earthly life, when he is born again. Then it is also his possession after death. Finally, it leads to eternal completion in the resurrection.

2.9.8 The Future Form of Eternal Life

Both the apostle Paul (in Romans 5:21 and 6:22) and the Synoptic Gospels (in Matthew 18:8; 25:46; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30) speak of eternal life in its future form and not as a present possession, as is the case in John.

Paul connects the full possession and enjoyment of eternal life with incorruptibility in the resurrection. He says that the reward for those “who by perseverance in good work seek glory and honor and incorruptibility [that of the body in the resurrection]” will be eternal life (Romans 2:7). For Paul, eternal life in its full meaning is being like the risen Christ in glory. That is the atmosphere in which eternal life is at home.

As those living on earth, we still have eternal life in a mortal body. In the resurrection we will be clothed with an “eternal tent” (2 Corinthians 5:1). That

is a body that will fully correspond to eternal life, to the state of completion. John too knows this aspect of eternal life.⁹⁷

The hope and expectation of eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7; Romans 6:22) consists in soon being able to experience and enjoy the things of heaven, of the Father's house, in the surroundings and atmosphere proper to that life.

2.9.9 The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit has been given to us.⁹⁸ Without going into further detail here, I point out that, as Jesus says, He will be with us forever:

"... and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17).

Consequently, the Spirit of God is with us in death too. Then too He is our strength. Like eternal life, during this intermediate time He is the guarantee that we will be with Jesus in full consciousness, in full strength and knowledge. It is precisely for this that the Spirit of God has been given to us as a guarantee, as security with a view to this moment:

"But the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee" (2 Corinthians 5:5).

What God has given us in our life will also be ours in death!

2.9.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state the following regarding the overarching question "What is the state of believers after death?": both eternal life and the Holy Spirit are a guarantee that the believer continues to live after death in conscious fellowship with Christ.

The life in the believer cannot die (not even when the outer man dies), because he possesses it in the Son, who lives for all eternity. Nor can the believer lose it any more, because otherwise he would lose his whole existence,

97. John 4:36; 12:25; cf. 1 John 3:1-2.

98. John 7:39; 14:16; 15:26; Acts 1:8; 19:2; Romans 8:9, 11, 14-16; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 4:8; 2 Timothy 1:14; James 4:5.

which he has as one born of God. This new existence is the work of God, a new creation that can neither be destroyed nor ever come to an end.

In the same way, all the characteristics of the Holy Spirit that have been given to us will determine our existence in death.

Questions for Further Study

- Distinguish “eternal life” from “immortality”!
- How does the death of a believer differ from that of an unbeliever? Consider the statement of John 11:26!
- What significance does the Holy Spirit have for the intermediate state?

2.10 The Spirits in Prison

The “spirits in prison” is a term directly related to our subject. It occurs only once in Holy Scripture, namely only in the first letter of Peter. That is precisely where the difficulty of understanding it correctly lies. In his second letter Peter writes that some of Paul’s letters are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16). Here, however, that probably applies to his own letter as well, for the passage in which the spirits are mentioned (1 Peter 3:19-20) is among the most difficult passages in the New Testament. This has led to many very different interpretations in church history, as there still are today.⁹⁹

It is Peter himself who names the most important principle of interpreting Scripture, namely “that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). So we will examine this text too in the light of all the New Testament passages we have already dealt with under 2.1–2.9, which have given us a comprehensive picture of the state between death and resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Peter writes to the *elect exiles of the dispersion*:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, in which he also went and preached to the spirits who are in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, into which a few, that is, eight souls, entered and were saved through water” (1 Peter 3:18-20).

99. See on this: William Kelly, *Christ Preaching to the Spirits in Prison*, The Bible Treasury, vol. 9, 1872; and: Jürgen Kuberski, *Eine Höllenfahrt Jesu?*, Bibel und Gemeinde, 2/1988; and: H.L. Heijkoop, *Der erste Brief des Petrus*, Neustadt (Schriftenverlag Ernst Paulus) 1978. See also the appendix.

2.10.1 Peter's Purpose

Peter is not concerned with the question of what the state after death is. No one had asked him about it or brought a false teaching that had to be refuted.¹⁰⁰ The believers to whom Peter writes were facing massive persecution for Jesus' sake.¹⁰¹ He wanted to encourage them in this difficult situation. That is why he compared their situation with that of Noah in the days before the flood. Noah, together with his family, formed a minority of only eight souls. At the word of the Lord he built a ship on dry land with his sons. No one else followed him. Just as Noah did not see God, the believers did not see Christ (1:8); it was a matter of faith. Noah's example and the working and presence of Christ through His Spirit were to spur them on to endure, even if their message was rejected and they were unjustly harassed.

2.10.2 My Explanation of the Text

The suffering Christ is the example for the believers, who, like Him, had to suffer for doing good. This verse is about the sufferings of Christ on account of sins. As the righteous one He died for the unrighteous, with the goal of bringing them to God. These are the atoning sufferings of Christ, which the believers did not need to endure. Christ's atonement brought Him death; He was "put to death in the flesh." But that was not the end, for He rose from the dead in the power of the Spirit of God (Romans 1:4; 8:11).

In this Spirit – not as man on earth – He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient. The Holy Spirit, in other words the Spirit of Christ (1 Peter 1:11), was at work in Noah, the herald of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). The preaching to Noah's contemporaries lasted as long as the ark was being built. None of them turned back; they all died in the floodwaters because of their disobedience. The Spirit of Christ was now at work with the same goal in the believers to whom Peter was writing (1 Peter 4:14; cf. 1:11), in order to spread through them the testimony of the grace of God.

Peter calls those who died in the time of Noah "spirits in prison." They did not believe the good news (1 Peter 4:6) and let the patience of God pass by over many years, during which the ark was being built. That is why their

100. Paul did this, e.g., in 1 Corinthians 15, where he takes action against the denial of the resurrection.

101. 1 Peter 1:6; 2:12, 19-21; 3:14, 17; 4:1, 4, 12, 16; 5:8-9.

judgment begins in death (Hebrews 9:27), and they find themselves in Hades, the place of torment (Luke 16:23), which is called a prison here. In this too there is an incentive for the believers. Their message and their hope, of which they were to give an account (1 Peter 3:15), were absolutely right. All who did not follow their message would come to the same place. For them too the prison was waiting after death. There would be their place until the day of resurrection and until the great day of judgment, as Peter writes shortly afterward:

“... but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:5).

Noah was saved in the ark through the floodwaters. Its counterpart, baptism, now also saves believers, in that they too, like Noah on earth, are brought into a new position. Separated from the world and their contemporaries (Acts 2:40-41), they now served the risen and glorified Christ, to whom all authority has been given.

Under the following headings I go into more detail on some terms and explanations that I do not consider biblical.

2.10.3 Put to Death in the Flesh – Made Alive by the Spirit

Although an explanation of the two expressions has already been given above, I mention a few further aspects here. There are no differing views on the expression “put to death in the flesh.” This undoubtedly refers to the atoning death of Christ. His death stands in contrast to what came after it, namely His resurrection. The resurrection is described as “made alive by the Spirit.” “Made alive” is the same expression as in Romans 4:17; 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:22, 36, 45. But the resurrection does not mean the “making alive” of the Lord’s spirit, but the resurrection of the body (John 2:19-22).

It is the Holy Spirit of God who is at work in the resurrection, for of Him it says: “It is the Spirit who gives life” (John 6:63). Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit in connection with the resurrection of the Lord and also of believers:

“... and declared ... to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:4).

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who

dwells in you” (Romans 8:11).

In the Lord Jesus the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 1:19-20; 2:9), that is, the triune God. All three Persons of the Godhead took part in the work of redemption and therefore also in His resurrection.

In this Spirit He went and preached. So He did not do this personally, that is, as man of flesh and blood. It was the Spirit of Christ¹⁰² who was already at work in the prophets of the Old Testament before Christ became man (1 Peter 1:11), and who is also at work now in the proclamation of the gospel, where He is called the “Holy Spirit” (1 Peter 1:12).

In the days of Noah the Spirit of God worked through Noah, whom Peter calls a “herald of righteousness” (2 Peter 2:5). Moses too speaks of the working of the Spirit of God in the time of Noah (Genesis 6:3) with regard to the judgment by the flood. In the New Testament too we find a parallel, where it says that Christ preached by proclaiming peace (Ephesians 2:17). But there too He did not do it personally, but through His servants. He had ascended into heaven and was no longer personally present.

2.10.4 The Preaching to the Spirits in Prison

Within the most varied interpretations there is broad agreement that in the short time between His death and His resurrection Christ personally preached to the spirits in Hades. Far-reaching questions are connected with this.

2.10.5 The Content of the Preaching

Although the variety of explanations shows that the content of the preaching, that is, the message, is not known, I can only make sense of a proclamation with the goal of bringing people to repentance so that they may be saved. That is generally the meaning of “preaching.”¹⁰³ This preaching is defined by Peter himself. He says that the good news was proclaimed to the dead (4:6). Such preaching in Hades would therefore mean that the dead were granted a second chance to repent.

102. The expression “Spirit of Christ” or “Spirit of Jesus” occurs in Acts 16:7; Romans 8:9; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11; “the Spirit of the Lord” in Acts 5:9; 8:39; 2 Corinthians 3:17. In all these passages it is the Holy Spirit of God.

103. E.g., Matthew 26:13; 1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 1:15.

Explanations of the content of the preaching range from the proclamation of Christ's victory to the proclamation of the good news. The idea that Christ's victory is proclaimed to the dead is mentioned nowhere in Scripture. It also makes little sense because the time will come in any case when all – and not only the people who had died up to the time of Christ's death – will acknowledge the lordship of Christ. Paul says that those on earth (i.e., the living) and those under the earth (i.e., the dead) are included in this:

“... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11).¹⁰⁴

Preaching as a call to repentance to the spirits in prison between the death and resurrection of Christ must further be rejected for the following reasons:

- We have no further indication in Scripture that would support this view. On the contrary, Christ went to paradise, to the believers, and not to Hades, as He Himself said in Luke 23:43.
- Peter says that He was made alive after He had died. He does not speak of what happened between death and resurrection.
- It makes no sense that it should be precisely the people of whom it is expressly said that during their lifetime they experienced the patience of God and rejected it who are preached to once more. The testimony of Scripture is clear that after death there is no longer any possibility of repentance.
- It would mean that He preached exclusively to the people who died in the flood. These people are obviously the ones in view here. But what about the people who died before or after – surely many more in total than these? Then surely all the dead should be able to hear a sermon.

That too makes no sense and opens up the possibility of repentance after death. But this is wrong and is not the teaching of Holy Scripture. The teaching of Jesus about Hades in Luke 16 clearly shows that after death there is no more

104. From Philippians 2:11 no time can be discerned as to when this will happen and whether it will be the same time for all those named. In agreement with other passages of Scripture, however, it can be inferred – especially from the judgment sessions – that this refers to the judgment of the living and the dead before the great throne, which will then affect all at the same time. In this sense the Lord Jesus also speaks of the “day of judgment” (Matthew 10:15; 11:22, 24; Luke 10:14).

change. A great, insurmountable chasm separates the place of blessing from the place of torment.

2.10.6 Souls and Spirits

The eight people who were saved in the ark are called “souls.” In his first letter Peter uses the word “soul” six times.¹⁰⁵ Five times he understands “soul” as an essential element of the believer; only once – in our text – does he mean the whole person by it. Had he said “people” here instead of “souls,” the meaning would be the same, for that is how the term “soul” is often used in Scripture.¹⁰⁶ This meaning of “soul” is still found in our language today.

Now if “soul” denotes the human being as he lived on earth in the time of Noah, what then is the meaning of the “spirits” who are in prison? Does the term “spirits” stand for people who have died? What can be clearly established is that “spirit” is nowhere used for the human being living on earth, in clear contrast to “soul.” Of course the word “spirit” is used very often in connection with human beings, but then exclusively as an essential component of the human being, just as is the case with the soul. In contrast, the word “spirit” is used for angels, both for those who serve God and for demons, that is, fallen angels (e.g., Matthew 10:1; Revelation 12:8).

2.10.7 Are the Spirits Fallen Angels?

This, however, provides no basis for the view that these are angels who are now locked away in the deepest abyss.¹⁰⁷ Those who hold this view refer to the following passages:

“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into the deepest abyss [Greek: Tartarus] and committed them to chains of darkness to be kept until the judgment ...” (2 Peter 2:4; cf. Jude 6),

in connection with Genesis 6:2-4:

“... the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive, and they took as their wives any they chose. Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is flesh; his days shall be 120 years.’ The giants were on the earth in

105. 1:9, 22; 2:11, 25; 3:20; 4:19.

106. E.g., Genesis 12:5; Exodus 1:5; Numbers 31:35; Acts 2:41; 7:14.

107. See Kenneth S. Wuest, *First Peter in Greek New Testament*, Michigan (Eerdmans Publishing), 1942.

those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them.”

The chains Jude writes about are seen as a parallel to the prison Peter writes about. The event in Genesis 6, where angels unite with women, undoubtedly relates to the time of Noah. Christ, it is said, brought a message to these angels who had fallen and are now bound and kept for judgment. But it cannot have been the message of grace and salvation, because according to Hebrews 2:16 the Lord does not take hold of angels to set them free.

There is no indication whatsoever in Scripture that Christ proclaimed His victory at Golgotha to angels, and it would make no sense either, because for them there is a day of judgment that is already fixed. Christ will be the Judge (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:3). At that point, then, there will be a display of His power and greatness in any case.

Ultimately there is no need for a proclamation of Christ's power, because the fallen angels – the demons or unclean spirits – knew the power of Christ even before Golgotha, including with regard to the judgment, and they feared His power (Luke 8:27-33; Matthew 8:29). The demons believe and shudder (James 2:19) even without a message proclaimed to them by Christ.

From Genesis 6 we can gather that the angels united with the women *before* the time of Noah, and so this event does not necessarily fall within the days of Noah.

It is wrong to understand “spirits” in this passage as angels, even if there seem to be points of contact. Once again, we must pay attention to the context and to the whole testimony of Scripture.

2.10.8 Spirits – People Who Have Died

Here Noah's contemporaries are called “spirits” because now, at the time the letter was written, they were in prison. The word “prison” indicates the consequence of their disobedience, for there is no end to their judgment. Their existence after death is not in a body of flesh and blood; they are “away from the body,” to use an expression of Paul's (2 Corinthians 5:8). That is why they are called spirits. Peter uses another designation for the persons who are called spirits here a few verses later. These verses still belong to the verses quoted above and actually form the conclusion of the line of thought:

“For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does” (1 Peter 4:6).

They are now – with regard to the spirit-soul – the spirits in prison. With regard to their body, they are now the dead. Both descriptions explain the same state, but from two sides. The one is the bodily aspect (“the dead”), the other the aspect of the spirit-soul. The good news was not proclaimed to those who were dead at that time, but to those who are dead now and who, back then, after hearing the message as living people, perished in the flood.¹⁰⁸

That is the meaning of the word “spirits,” which can be recognized from the context – even without any knowledge of the original language.

There is another passage that speaks of spirits, that is, of people after their death:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Hebrews 12:22-23).

At the end of this glorious list stands the term that interests us in this context: “spirits of the righteous made perfect.”¹⁰⁹ Here, then, the spirits are separated from their body and form part of the assembly of the firstborn. This term refers only to them, for only sinners have been justified by the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus does not apply to angels. The spirits cannot be angels, because angels are named separately in this list.

108. Some interpreters take death in a spiritual sense (cf. Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13; Luke 15:24, 32). In my opinion, however, spiritual death is never mentioned in the Old Testament or applied to the people of the Old Testament era.

109. The difference between the terms in 1 Peter and Hebrews 12 is that in Peter “spirits” denotes the whole person, while in Hebrews 12 the spirits are seen as an essential element of the believers; this makes it clear that besides the spirit there is a body. Basically these terms have the same meaning. In this context I would point to the term “cloud of witnesses,” who surround the runner of faith as in an arena. The witnesses are the heroes of faith from Hebrews 11, who are now in the heavenly paradise. It has been suggested that they watch Christians like spectators at a contest. In my opinion this cannot be. They would see our whole life, including intimate matters. We cannot say anything certain about this, since Scripture is silent on it.

2.10.9 The Prison

Is the prison really Hades? The answer to this question is not simple, since we find the term “prison” in connection with spirits only once in Scripture.

The word “prison” is used here in no other sense than the one we know from other passages in the New Testament.¹¹⁰ The offender is taken into custody and cannot escape this place¹¹¹ until the question of guilt has been settled. The term “prison” is well explained by the fact that the unrighteous are held after their death until the day of judgment. It is Peter who also mentions this in his second letter:

“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2:9).

This truth also corresponds to our present-day understanding that there is pretrial detention until the court hearing. This explanation is in no way in contradiction to all the other texts we have already considered in connection with our topic. On the contrary, it completes the picture of the lot of the unrighteous after death.¹¹²

It is also true of certain angels that they are held in custody in “prison.” There they are held until the day of judgment. They are in the dungeon until the day the sentence is pronounced.

The word “prison” is also understood in the sense of “the prison of sin.” This is how Isaiah (42:7; 49:9; 61:1) and Luke (4:18-19) use this expression. But in my opinion this application is not possible here, because the spirits are not living people but were living people. If a prison of sin were being spoken of in connection with spirits, then only in the sense that they are now bound to their sin because they have no forgiveness.

2.10.10 The Release of Old Testament Believers from Sheol?

Another fairly widespread view is that the Old Testament believers who were in Sheol were either in a place of torment or in a kind of waiting state that cannot be described as blessedness. When Christ went to this place after His death, He

110. E.g., Matthew 14:10; Luke 3:20; Acts 5:19; 2 Corinthians 6:5.

111. Perhaps we also have a reference to this place in Acts 1:25.

112. It seems almost superfluous to mention that those who are in prison are fully conscious, for those who are asleep do not need to be kept in a prison.

set the believers free and led them into paradise, or by His presence made this place into paradise.

This view is based, among other things, on the meaning of the term “Sheol” in the Old Testament. Sheol is, among other things, a negative, dark place to which the dead go. Paradise, on the other hand, is not mentioned in the Old Testament as the place of believers who have died. But the fact that it had not been revealed does not mean that there was no paradise. Should Abraham have come into fear and terror after death? Even he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God, and to a heavenly homeland that is not in this world (Hebrews 11:10, 14, 16).

In the same way one would have to ask: Did he know of, or even have, forgiveness of sins at all, since Christ had not yet come?¹¹³

I do not want to answer the question of whether there was a release from Sheol only with counterquestions. But we have no biblical text on this that could be discussed. In my opinion this idea also makes no sense, and there is no parallel in Scripture that even hints at such an act of Christ.

Abraham was gathered to his fathers.¹¹⁴ We can assume that he met them again in the world beyond. His God, whom he knew as the Almighty, is the God of the living (Luke 20:38). From this we can conclude that Abraham, who is called the friend of God (James 2:23), now leads a blessed life that needs no release or improvement until the resurrection.

When the Lord Jesus spoke of the place of blessedness as “Abraham’s bosom,” He used an expression that the Jews either already knew or could easily understand: it was a place of blessing for the righteous after their death. One cannot infer from this that Abraham was the center for Old Testament believers in death until Christ, after His death, opened the door to paradise – for Abraham, too. Paradise was – to put it this way – open for the believers of all ages. Paradise was always there, for it is the presence of God before His heavenly throne.

113. On the basis of Romans 3:25-26 we can assume that God did not count the sins of Old Testament believers against them with a view to the sacrifice of Jesus – in anticipation, so to speak. Accordingly, there was also no reason why Abraham should have had to experience any torment or even purification after his death.

114. Genesis 25:8; cf. Moses in Numbers 27:13 (see section 1.5.3).

2.10.11 Did Jesus Descend into Hell?

The question of whether the Lord Jesus descended into hell is actually superfluous, because it has already been answered from various angles. Some creeds, which themselves have undergone changes again and again, confess Jesus as the One who descended into hell or into the realm of death. Luther and others with him translate “Hades” as “hell” (German: *Hölle*), and this is how the idea of Christ’s “descent into hell” arose.

In support of a “descent into hell,” Ephesians 4:8-10, for example, is cited:

“Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led captivity captive, and he gave gifts to men.’ But this – ‘he ascended’ – what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.”

This is about the exaltation of Jesus and the depth of His humiliation. The lowest point of His humiliation was death. It was already a condescension that He, God the Son, was *on* the earth as a man (cf. Philippians 2:5-11). But for us He even went into death and was buried. That is what is meant by the “*lower parts of the earth*,” just as the following verse also says.

Matthew 12:40 is about physical death, not about a stay in the realm of the dead.

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

From the quotation of Psalm 16:10 in Acts 2:27 one could conclude that the Lord Jesus was in Hades:

“... for you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.”

But this verse is no proof that the Lord was actually in Hades. See the explanation under 2.1.8 on this (and also the Appendix).

2.10.12 Conclusion

I never tire of emphasizing that after His death the Lord Jesus did not go into Hades, and certainly not into hell. He went into paradise, as He Himself had said to the criminal on the cross.

The descent into Hades for the purpose of preaching there finds no further support in Scripture. Furthermore, preaching there, whatever its content might have been, makes no sense. All the dead, including the fallen angels, are kept without a chance to repent until their judgment, where they will then be confronted with the judicial power of Christ.

The fate of the unrepentant sinner is an incentive for believers not to remain silent despite difficulties, but to be, like Noah, a herald of righteousness.

Questions for Further Study

- Who are the “spirits” in 1 Peter 3?
- Who preached to them, and when did this happen?
- Where was the Lord Jesus between His death and His resurrection – and where was He not?
- Why?
- How does Peter use this passage to encourage the believers of that time (and us today)?

2.11 Death Experiences and Near-Death Experiences

With the testimony of Holy Scripture we have gained a clear picture of the hereafter. But in our time this picture is confronted not only with false theological or doctrinal views, but also with experiences close to death, that is, death experiences and near-death experiences. These involve people who were “clinically” dead and were resuscitated, but who were not “biologically” dead. They were “somewhere” in the zone between death and life. They were not dead in the sense in which I have always assumed death in my study, namely as something irreversible and final.

For a better understanding of what is meant by clinical death, I quote a physician: “Clinical death means, first, respiratory arrest, that is, the total failure of oxygen uptake from the surrounding air and of carbon dioxide release into the surroundings. It further means cardiac arrest, that is, the complete paralysis of the circulation. When clinical death has occurred, the electrocardiogram shows the so-called flat line on the screen, that is, no heart curve at all. Clinical death is reversible within a very limited span of time, for example by very strong electric shocks. If resuscitation does not succeed, ‘biological death’ sets in after a few minutes. Biological death means that the individual organ systems, above all the brain, cease to function ... Beyond the threshold of biological

death there is, as a rule, no return.”¹¹⁵

In this zone between life and “final” death, phenomena have occurred that I now want to discuss.¹¹⁶ This is not about people who came back to life through a resurrection, but about those who were *clinically* dead for only a very short time. During this time their soul – their consciousness – left the body. They saw, for example, how doctors in the operating room fought for their lives. They report encounters with friendly beings of light and old acquaintances in pleasant surroundings. They did not want to go back into their bodies. These positive experiences are reported not only by Christians but also by those who have nothing to do with faith in Christ. For them, after such an experience, death no longer holds anything frightening, and they pass on this experience like good news.

Christians must be able to take a clear position on these phenomena, since these reports put death in our society in a new, downright attractive light. Man’s last enemy seems to have been defeated, for with these experiences death is the passage into a perfect world marked by love. “Wir kommen alle, alle in den Himmel” (“We’re all, all going to heaven”) is then a song one can rightly sing. Or it remains: “Everything will be fine.”

Since the publications of Dr. Raymond Moody, Robert A. Monroe, E. Kübler-Ross, and others, these ideas about death have spread widely. Mrs. Kübler-Ross sums up the message of the death researchers: “God is not a punishing and condemning being. What we learn from people who have come back is the assurance that every human being, after crossing over, may experience the feeling of peace, balance, and wholeness”¹¹⁷.

Are these not spectacular insights? It is indeed more important to lift the veil on the mystery of death and the hereafter than for a human being to land on the moon or on Mars. At last, so it seems, there is a glimpse of the other side, and this takes away our fear of death, because there is no God there to whom one must give account for one’s life. All this is given a scientific veneer, so that these insights appear serious and reliable.

115. Dr. med. Hartmut Maier-Gerber, *Sterben – Der Höhepunkt des Lebens*, Wuppertal, 1994, pp. 20f.; quoted in R. Moeckel, *Ist Sterben doch ganz anders*, Sehnäde.

116. I myself have not had a death experience, nor do I personally know anyone who has had one. These phenomena are therefore assessed solely on the basis of the written material available to me, which is accessible to everyone.

117. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Über den Tod und das Leben danach*, Berlin, 1994, p. 44.

2.11.1 Is There Anything to These Reports?

The reports must be viewed with great caution. The accounts of the authors mentioned cannot be taken seriously word for word, since they are often shaped by a pagan worldview, by spiritism, and by the New Age movement, and the phenomena are also interpreted in accordance with this worldview. Yet there is still reason enough to take these extraordinary phenomena seriously and not to doubt their truthfulness. Too many people, both Christians and non-Christians, have experienced such things. To dismiss the reports as ghost stories and fantasy would be too simple a conclusion – indeed, a wrong one. But what are we really to make of them, and how can these reports be classified and assessed biblically?

2.11.2 Death Experiences in the Bible?

The first question is always whether we find phenomena of this kind in God's Word. Since we have accounts of people being raised from the dead, let us look at the persons concerned.

The best-known account is the raising of Lazarus by Jesus (John 11). This account says that Lazarus had already been dead for four days and that the decay of his body had set in. Here we must assume biological death. The Lord over life and death called Lazarus back to life. That was a miracle and a sign as a testimony for the Jews.

It is remarkable that nothing is reported of what Lazarus experienced during the time he was dead. Hardly anything is reported about Lazarus anyway, but here there would surely have been something to report. His statements about the hereafter would have been of an entirely different dimension from what we get to hear today.

The two other raisings by Jesus are no less spectacular. There is the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:22; Luke 8:41) and the young man of Nain (Luke 7:11). They, too, were biologically dead and were raised by the Lord Jesus, the Author of life (Acts 3:15). Of them, too, nothing is reported about experiences in the hereafter.

The same applies, by the way, to all the other raisings from the dead reported in the Old or New Testament.

Even Jesus, who during His death was in paradise according to His own words, reported nothing about this stay. Could He not have told how glorious paradise is and what joy there was there when He met the believers of all ages?

It is striking that in His Word God speaks of only a single experience that confirms the existence of paradise on the basis of an eyewitness account. It was Paul who was caught up into the third heaven, into paradise (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

On the other hand, the fact that the Bible reports nothing about such experiences (apart from one exception) is not yet proof that they do not exist. It does, however, make something fundamental clear. God gives no proofs, because He has no need to. In His Word He makes it sufficiently and unmistakably clear that there are paradise and Hades, as well as heaven and hell.

This becomes very clear with poor Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16. The rich man was in torment in Hades and knew that if his brothers did not turn to God, they would one day follow him to this terrible place. They were living as he had lived. He saw the only possibility for them to repent in someone being sent to their house to warn them urgently: “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them urgently, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, *but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.*’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead’” (Luke 16:27-31; translated from the German Elberfelder Bible).

God knows man and his unbelief, and He knows that the sinner will not respond even if someone rises from the dead. God requires repentance and the obedience of faith from the sinner. The sinner has the testimony of creation and a conscience. In addition, God has given him His Word and the preaching of the gospel. The testimony of Holy Scripture is fundamentally sufficient. People demand proofs and signs; but the ministry of Jesus with its many miracles of the most varied kinds has shown that even the overwhelming proofs of His deity did not bring about people’s repentance, but only even greater hatred.

The Lord Jesus Christ said that He was going into paradise, from where He came back in the resurrection. He has told us nothing about His time in

paradise. My conclusion is that it is not important for us to know anything about it. His concern was not the hereafter; His concern was this world, namely the kingdom of God on earth. What moved the disciples was when the Lord would establish the kingdom of God. During the 40 days after the resurrection the Lord Jesus spoke with them about this for many hours (Acts 1:3). Here, too, it is clearly evident that the focus of Scripture as a whole is not the hereafter or the intermediate state, but always the consummation in the resurrection and the completion of God's ways with the whole of creation.

2.11.3 The Apostles Paul and John

The observations above do not give a final answer to the difficult questions about death experiences. But we have established a principle that we must apply when confronted with these phenomena.

We see with Paul and John, and also with other believers, that they report about heaven and paradise. At the end of his life John was in prison on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1). There he received visions, which he wrote down in the book of Revelation. Revelation is an eyewitness report from heaven. John was in the Spirit on the Lord's day. This means that the Spirit of God came upon him and he entered another world, where he met the risen One. It even says that he was called up into heaven. It was not a dream; it was reality, which gripped him so much that he wrote down in detail everything he saw. That was neither a death experience nor a near-death experience. But it makes clear that God gave people experiences through which they came into contact with heaven, with angels, and with the Lord Jesus Himself. Prophets such as Isaiah (e.g., chapter 6), Daniel, Ezekiel, and others had the same experience. With these persons, however, it is about the fulfillment of their special ministry as prophets, who wrote the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. So these are not "ordinary" death experiences.

It was the same with Paul: "I must go on boasting, though it is of no use to me; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago (whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows) – a man who was *caught up to the third heaven*. And I know that such a man (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows) was *caught up into paradise* and heard inexpressible words, which a man may not utter" (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

In Paul's case it could have been a death experience and a resurrection. Between the writing of the second letter to the Corinthians and the stoning of Paul in Lystra, as reported in Acts 14:19, lie 14 years. A stoning was not ended until it had been made certain that the person stoned was really dead. They dragged Paul out of the city because they were convinced that he was dead. But then Paul simply got up – there is no mention here of any attempts by the disciples to revive him – and went back into the city. That is a miracle. Either Paul was raised from the dead, or he came to on his own. Was he caught up into paradise during this event? We cannot prove it, but neither can we rule it out. The example of the apostle makes clear that extraordinary experiences in the hereafter – in this case of believers – are possible in principle.

In the same way, the martyr Stephen literally, not in a dream, saw heaven opened (Acts 7:55-56). It was not a death experience, although death by stoning followed shortly afterward. We should not rule out such a revelation in principle even today.

2.11.4 Death Experiences – Heaven and Hell

The large number of death experiences in our time can in many cases be traced back to the modern technical aids that make resuscitation possible. The high degree of technology in our society raises questions that are not dealt with directly in Scripture. Here we must look for answers or principles, which we can find only in His Word with the help of the Spirit of God. God's Word is relevant and binding in our day too, even if it is sometimes not easy to apply it to the questions of our time. A living understanding of Scripture worked by the Spirit is marked precisely by applying God's Word in our time and by recognizing and assessing the times in their spiritual dimension (1 Chronicles 12:32).

What is important about death experiences is that there are also extremely negative experiences. As different as heaven and hell are, so different are the experiences in death experiences. People report experiences of hell, of torment, and of demons. These experiences of terror are not reported in the bestsellers, since they distort the beautiful picture of death with its positive experiences and point to the possibility that there is a hell and punishment for sins after all. Some people suppress what they experienced and soon forget it again; others seek salvation in Christ.

With this information, which Dr. Rawlings¹¹⁸ presents in detail, there can by definition no longer be any talk of there being a heaven for all people and of hell being merely an invention of the church. The quotation from Mrs. Kübler-Ross cited above is therefore untrue!

We can conclude that death experiences correspond to the picture given in Scripture insofar as they reflect both places or states of the hereafter. It is as if Hades and paradise cast their shadows ahead in this zone between life and death.

2.11.5 The Deception of Darkness

It makes us suspicious that people who want nothing to do with Jesus Christ and the Bible have positive death experiences and meet angelic beings and acquaintances who are evidently very well off in the hereafter. They meet no judge who calls them to account, and with regard to the evil they have done they are even defended and excused.

The beings they meet are friendly, brightly shining beings who radiate love. Our assessment of these beings is unambiguous, because they tell untruths: they are demons who imitate the tactics of their supreme leader, the devil (2 Corinthians 12:7; Revelation 12:8). He disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14) and so deceives people into thinking his corrupt intentions are good.

At the interface with the hereafter the spirits are just waiting to exert their evil influence. This shows us clearly how close to people these spirits stay, and not only at the threshold of death. These reports make the presence of evil spirits all the more evident. They are in the air and so dwell among people; they have also taken possession of some people and live in them, which became evident especially during the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ and through His healings and deliverances. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the *prince of the power of the air, the spirit* that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2) and: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

118. Dr. med. Maurice S. Rawlings, *Zur Hölle und zurück, Leben nach dem Tod – überraschende Beweise*, Hamburg (Verlag C.M. Fließ), 1996.

I fear that the activity and influence of demons are often underestimated by Christians; as a result, some of them have sadly already fallen victim to the enemy's cunning. It is a tremendously satanic attack on the thinking of mankind. The fear of death is abolished. But it is a shameless lie. Who other than the devil has an interest in portraying death as harmless and as the entrance into an infinitely beautiful world?

At the moment of his death, poor Lazarus was carried by God's angels into Abraham's bosom. Of these angels we read: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14). So they are present at the boundary between this world and the hereafter.

2.11.6 Those Who Consult the Dead Are an Abomination to the Lord

God has set a clear boundary between the living and the dead. He forbids any attempt to make contact with the dead. Those who consult the dead cross this clear boundary. That is why God's judgment on these men and women is very drastic: "A man or a woman who is a medium or a necromancer shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus 20:27).¹¹⁹

This word also makes clear that the abilities – or, better, the attempts – to get in touch with the dead are directed by evil spirits that have taken possession of the mediums (1 Samuel 28:7-8). Not least for this reason God condemns these people so harshly. So what can be seen here are not human abilities, but supernatural powers whose origin is the kingdom of evil. It is clearly a matter of the influence of evil powers.

It is therefore also clear that these spirits deceive, for they cannot bring up the spirits of the dead. It is a lie that fallen angels, who followed Satan in his rebellion, are able to take control of the dead. Their ability consists in imitating the person concerned in a deceptively genuine way. They deceive all those who want to come into contact with the dead through mediums in order to learn things they could not otherwise learn. In this way the devil extends his influence as the god of this age.

Through Isaiah, God called on His people to inquire of their God: "And when they say to you, 'Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who

119. See further Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:11-12; 1 Samuel 28:3; 2 Kings 21:6; 1 Chronicles 10:13.

chirp and mutter,’ should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?” (Isaiah 8:19).

In this context it is important to see that many death researchers, such as Mrs. Kübler-Ross, also had intensive dealings with the spirit world. She reports on her spirits, with whom she often had contact. The devil, who has the power of death, knows people’s fear of death and exploits it to delude them into thinking that death is not a judgment and the consequence of sin after all. So man supposedly needs no redemption, although the Victor over death has accomplished it. “You will not surely die” was the lie of the deceiver from the beginning (Genesis 3:4), and he keeps finding new arguments to disguise this lie.

Many death researchers are spiritists and connected with the New Age movement. That is why they can only be people who have been deceived.

2.11.7 Saul and Samuel

The incident of Saul and the medium at En-dor in 1 Samuel 28 is a remarkable exception. Although Saul made a great mistake here, and although mediums cannot bring up the dead, Samuel really did appear in this case. Two things make this clear: First, it was not the woman who called up Samuel. He appeared without any action on her part. The woman’s horror shows that something completely different was happening here from what she was used to. She was not in control of the situation. Never would the prophet of God have been brought up by a spirit of divination. Second, Samuel clearly spoke the truth, which was already known to Saul. So it was not just some spirit pretending to be Samuel and lying to Saul. Samuel appeared here just as Moses and Elijah later appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration.

This incident therefore confirms that the dead cannot be brought up by mediums or demonic spirits. Only God can do that, and as far as Scripture reports, He did it only here. There is simply no exchange between the this-worldly realm of the living and the otherworldly realm of the dead. Between the living and the departed there is a separation that cannot be broken through. By this I do not mean the world of demons, which certainly does try to come into contact with this world. But demons no longer have anything to do with the departed.

2.11.8 Antichristian Deception in the End Times

The moral and ethical problems arising from rapidly advancing technological development are a sign of the end times. Death experiences, which have become possible on a large scale only through technology, also open the door to demons and their teachings: “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Timothy 4:1).

Even today the events of the end times, as described in Revelation, cast their shadows ahead: “*for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, ...*” (Revelation 16:14). The spirit of the Antichrist is already at work now and, after the Rapture of the church, will unfold fully to an extent never known before. He will perform signs and wonders, and we do not know how much room God will give Satan to perform miracles that one would attribute only to God. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will consume with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the appearing of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is *by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders*, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:8-10).

I mention these verses because they describe precisely today’s situation. Death experiences that in no way correspond to the Word of God are also part of Satan’s end-time program. He lets no opportunity slip, and this is only the beginning.

2.11.9 Conclusion¹²⁰

What, then, are we to make of death experiences? This question cannot be answered in one sentence. Some aspects of death experiences are very complex and touch on questions of psychology, parapsychology, and the occult. That is why I close this chapter with some fundamental observations that can help us arrive at a clear judgment.

For people with death experiences, that is, for people who “came back,” death was not irreversible death, which is why their experiences do not really

120. For a more detailed study of death experiences, I recommend the books by John Ankerberg & John Weldon (see Bibliography).

give information about the hereafter.

They were neither in heaven nor in hell. “Dying” is not the same as “being dead.” Driving to Munich and turning back along the same road does not mean having reached Munich, let alone living there.

If what they experienced corresponded to heaven or hell,¹²¹ then we are dealing with a realm between life and death about which Holy Scripture says nothing. Yet on the basis of the many testimonies about such experiences we conclude that in the zone where the soul leaves the body for a short time,¹²² spirits can approach the soul – both angels of God and also demons, the angels of Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7). Satan’s deception consists in deceiving these people with a false heaven although they are lost. In the vast majority of cases, the information brought back from the “hereafter” does not correspond to the truth of the Bible.

The end times are marked by demonic deception, which does not stop short of Christians either. Much of what is reported is shot through with the wishful thinking of the authors and supposed researchers; other things are simply fraud. In most cases the worldview of the so-called death researchers corresponds to the New Age movement, to mysticism, and to Eastern religions and philosophies. For this reason alone these people are defenselessly exposed to satanic deception.

When professing Christians have death experiences, one thing must always remain firm: the canon of Holy Scripture is closed. There will be no new insights that could reveal to us anything we do not already know from the Bible. Christians who have had such experiences should not draw theological conclusions from them, but should ask themselves what God wants to tell them through what they experienced with regard to their personal spiritual life.

Let us pray that we may be able to distinguish between spirits (1 Corinthians 12:10; 1 John 4:1) and take a clear, biblical position.

Questions for Further Study

- What would you answer someone who claims to have died and come back?

121. There are also people who were clinically dead and experienced nothing at all.

122. Similar experiences can be induced by drugs and therefore do not necessarily have anything to do with death. There are countless reports of people who, without having had a death experience, have had an experience outside their body.

- On the other hand, how do you answer the objection, “After all, no one has ever come back!”?
- Why do death experiences not give reports about heaven and hell?
- How should a Christian who has had a death experience respond to it?
- Why can death experiences not bring any new insights to light?

3 The Biblical View of Man

Using the term “spirit-soul” obliges us to examine the biblical view of man. In fact, the subject of “death” and “the immortality of the soul” cannot really be understood without examining man and what makes him what he is. This is to be done here to a limited extent and with regard to our topic. The Bible, however, is not a textbook of anthropology¹²³ that would speak comprehensively about man in one place. Moreover, it speaks about man not in the language of theologians or psychologists, but in everyday language. Biblical language is many-sided and often uses the same expression in different meanings. This is not the only reason the subject is difficult and extensive; gaining an overview therefore takes effort. Even if the subject is difficult and there are different opinions about it, the believer should not let that keep him from studying it. After all, it is about himself – how God created him, how God intended him to be! In this the greatness and wisdom of God can be seen.

Anyone who takes up the Word of God on this subject will find several terms that describe essential elements of man. These are words such as “heart, spirit, soul, kidneys, bones, flesh, body, thoughts, conscience, mind, will,” and so on. These terms must be examined in their context.

In doing so, one will find that the terms are used with a variety of meanings and translations. So at the end of the examination there will be no solution in which we have flawless and unambiguous definitions. But the essential terms will be clearer, and we will be able to classify many of them better. A general structure or order will become visible, which we can call the biblical view of man.¹²⁴

Nor is my examination an extensive study in its own right, detached from any context. It is undertaken especially with regard to the erroneous view that man no longer exists in any way after death. It is claimed that man has no soul and

123. The doctrine of man.

124. In principle, the examination must assume that man in his entire constitution, that is, all his essential elements, has come under the effects of sin, and that therefore none of them can be regarded as neutral or unaffected by sin. At this point it becomes clear that views of man in general stand in stark contrast to the biblical view of man. Among psychologists and philosophers who do not know the Creator and therefore reject His revelation, we will hardly find answers that take into account the Fall or man's responsibility before the Creator.

no spirit as elements distinct from the body. Man is seen *exclusively* in his wholeness and unity, which is destroyed by death. Consequently, death means nonexistence until the new creation in the resurrection. Spirit and soul, the seat and center of human personality, are accordingly said to be temporal and, like the body, perishable.

Since I have already shown in detail that there is consciousness after death, it is not surprising that these false views are based on a view of man that does not correspond to that of the Bible.

3.1 What Does a Human Being Consist Of?

As already indicated, there are several terms in the Old and New Testaments that denote essential components of man. And it is not the terms “spirit” and “soul” that come first; it is the “heart” that, more than all other terms, describes the essence of man. “Heart” occurs more than a thousand times in the Bible, and with different meanings. The human heart – not the hollow muscle that pumps the blood – is in its figurative meaning the center of the person, his innermost and therefore also hidden being.

As the crown of creation and the image of God, man is an extremely complex being. It would be too simple to divide him into two or three elements. Man does not consist of “substances” that can be taken apart, but forms a unity with different aspects. An aspect¹²⁵ describes man from a certain standpoint or angle. We are considering man from the aspect of his existence beyond time. Our question is what happens to man in death.

It is remarkable that this question often touches on the essential elements or aspects that are called “spirit” and “soul.”¹²⁶ The heart, which more than any other term is *the* anthropological term of the Bible par excellence, is hardly mentioned in this context, if at all.

Two passages of Scripture are to serve as the starting point for my examination. The one goes back to the creation of man, the other points to the future:

125. See the detailed discussion in W.J. Ouwenel, *Psychologie, Ein Bibelorientiert-Wissenschaftlicher Entwurf*, Dillenburg (CVD), 1993, pp. 61–67.

126. E.g., Genesis 8:21; Deuteronomy 6:5; 26:16; Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 22:37; Mark 7:21; Romans 1:21; 2:15; 10:9.

“Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7) and: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

In these verses we find the terms “spirit,” “soul,” and “body” in connection with the origin or creation of man and with regard to his future. Paul speaks of the coming of the Lord, and for him, in this passage, the whole person consists of spirit, soul, and body. The phrase “sanctify you *completely*” expressly underlines this truth. This “order” of the essential elements is in fact found only once in God’s Word, namely here. From this passage many derive an exclusive threefold division of man.¹²⁷ If that were so, where would the human heart remain, and how would all the other terms mentioned above then be explained? Paul does not limit man in general to these three aspects, for he, too, uses other terms in his letters. Here he has the future in view and says that the whole person in his diversity, in all his aspects, will be kept for the day of Christ.

For Paul it is important to have this view of man with regard to the future. And his view is nothing other than an adoption and summary of all the passages contained in the Old Testament that, starting from Genesis 2:7, say something about the constitution of man. It cannot be otherwise, since Holy Scripture, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, forms a unity put together by God. Paul’s view of man thus corresponds entirely to God’s revelation as it had already been given in the Old Testament. So it is not a new or even a Greek view of man, but, if you will, a Hebrew or Jewish view of man.

127. I will not pursue here the old debate over whether man in the biblical sense exists dichotomously (in two parts) or trichotomously (in three parts). I prefer the approach in which there is no such clear demarcation between soul and spirit because of their manifold meanings. Helpful, therefore, is the observation: “Viewed functionally, then, in the living human being, if one takes his wholeness into account, one may certainly speak of spirit, soul, and body, as is done, for example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Substantially, however, it remains the case that man consists of only two ‘parts,’ the transcendent part of the spirit-soul and the immanent part of the body. Thus one could speak of a substantial dichotomy and a functional trichotomy. The soul, then, has no independent existence apart from body and spirit, although it is not entirely identical with the spirit either, but always – even after a person’s death – remains distinguishable” (Roland Antholzer, *Geist, Seele und Leib – der Mensch in seiner Beschaffenheit*).

Paul names a particular order in which he puts the human spirit first. This does not, however, devalue the body because it comes last¹²⁸. Why this order was chosen emerges from the creation of man, where the spirit (the breath of life) is the essential element that first makes man a human being as the image of God.

3.2 The Human Spirit

The main statements of the Old Testament about the creation of man are:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ...’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Genesis 1:26-27).

“Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7).

Here we see the first man, at first lifeless, formed from the dust of the earth. Then comes the act of bringing to life, unique in the creation account: God breathes the breath of life into his nostrils. The result is the living human being with a material body formed from the earth, who, as the only creature, has within himself God’s breath of life. The breath of life enters into him and remains there; it thus belongs to his constitution.¹²⁹ It makes him a human being as the image of God.

3.2.1 The Breath of Life

The breath of life, which God gave from Himself, corresponds to the human spirit, as Paul also names it in 1 Thessalonians 5.¹³⁰ The word “breath” (German: *Odem*) is translated in various ways. This word has a wide range of meaning. It refers to God, to man, and to animals. One meaning is that the breath of life is the spirit that God has given to man, which is breathed into

128. Nevertheless, it is an order that the Christian should observe: the needs of the body can prove to be a superfluous burden and thus a hindrance to spiritual development. That is why Paul said: “I discipline my body and keep it under control” (1 Corinthians 9:27). He did not want to be “governed by the body;” but governed by his spirit, which is renewed by the Holy Spirit. His body was to be the instrument of his spirit and follow its thoughts, not the other way around.

129. Composition, makeup, order.

130. This is attested several times in the Old Testament: Job 27:3; 32:8; 33:4, 6; 34:14-15; Isaiah 42:5; 57:16; 1 Kings 17:17, 21 in connection with Psalm 104:29-30 and Ezekiel 37:1-14.

man as the most essential element of his constitution, in contrast to the animals.

Through the spirit that God gives to every human being,¹³¹ man becomes an independent person, that is, an “I” and thus also a “you” for God. The term “person,” so familiar to us, has its origin precisely here. God is an infinite and yet personal God; He is the Creator and Sustainer of man.

Man, created in the image of God, is a person whose personality is derived from the personality of God.

3.2.2 The Spirit from God and the Human Spirit

If the spirit that God gives makes man a person by forming the human spirit, then we must clearly distinguish two aspects of this spirit, which are of great importance for our topic. On the one hand, it is and remains the spirit that comes from God. This does not make man equal to God; rather, he possesses this spirit as a *gift*, in dependence on the Giver, just as the leaves of a tree have strength and life only in connection with the tree. This is also how we must understand Paul’s statement when he tells the Greeks on the Areopagus that we are “God’s offspring” (Acts 17:28-29; cf. the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:38, where God stands at the beginning as the originator of the human race: “the son of Adam, *the son of God*”).

The second aspect lies in the human, independent existence of this spirit. In man, the spirit from God became the *human spirit*, which makes him a person (Romans 1:9; 1 Corinthians 16:18; 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:13; Philippians 4:23; 2 Timothy 4:22; Philemon 25).

So there is also talk of “their” – that is, man’s – spirit (breath), which grows faint before God (Isaiah 57:16). Here it is the human spirit in its weakness and frailty, in contrast to the spirit from God, which cannot grow faint.

The spirit is the innermost being of man (Psalm 32:2; also called the heart: Mark 7:20-23; Isaiah 57:15; 1 Corinthians 7:34)¹³². It is the center of the self, the “I” as a person (Isaiah 26:9). This spirit from God gives man his likeness to God (“God is spirit”; John 4:24) and constitutes his humanity as God intended it.

131. The “spirit from God” must not be confused with the Holy Spirit, whom we call the third Person of the Godhead. It is the spirit from God, though not as a person, but as an animating power. It is what God has given to man from Himself.

132. Cf. “*inner man*” in 2 Corinthians 4:16, where, however, it describes the new life of the believer.

The spirit is not, as is often assumed, the human intellect. This view has its origin in Greek philosophy, where spirit is synonymous with “intellect” and “knowledge.” This view obscures the unique biblical view of man. The Bible itself brings out the difference between “spirit” and “mind,” although the spirit both thinks and feels. Thinking, which we assign to the intellect, is only *one* function of the spirit (Proverbs 20:27; 1 Corinthians 2:11; 14:14; Isaiah 29:24).

The human spirit is also the “place” in us to which God can speak. It is the point of contact and the antenna for God’s working in man (Proverbs 20:27). For example, the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit (that is, the human spirit) that we are children of God (Romans 8:16). Yet it is the whole person whom God addresses. The spirit is the entrance for God’s speaking, but when a person submits to God, it is the whole person who places himself in God’s service.

The human spirit is the essential part of man, in the believer as well as in the unbeliever (Genesis 41:8; 45:27; Ezra 1:1, 5; Daniel 6:3). But without the Holy Spirit the human spirit is fleshly (Romans 8:4-8), incapable of entering into fellowship with God.

The orientation toward God of man fallen into sin, and of his human spirit, is clearly expressed in the religions. In his orientation toward God, man does not turn to his Creator, but to idols, behind which stand the demons.

The essential point for our study is that the spirit given by God possesses the property of immortality. The immortality of the human spirit is not mentioned explicitly, but it follows from the fact that the breath of God cannot die. It is the breath, or spirit, of the eternal God (Romans 16:26). The breath of God, which every human being has within from the beginning, is, however, not the Holy Spirit as a Person of the Godhead. Only of the children of God is it said that the Holy Spirit dwells in them. The breath of God does not mean the Person of the Spirit of God, but the breath of God as something that corresponds to the life of God and is thus the animating power of man. In its nature and “substance,” this breath of God is from God. If man has this spirit, then his spirit – always in dependence on the eternal God – must also be immortal, or beyond time.

At this point I repeat: man has the breath of God as a gift that is decisive for his being human. In its independent existence it at the same time constitutes the person of man. That is why it is interesting to learn what is said about the

human spirit in connection with death.¹³³ The classic passage in the book of Ecclesiastes, which is often cited, says that the dust, that is, the human body, returns to the earth, and the spirit to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Here the spirit is seen in its imperishability, as it outlasts the death and decay of the body. But this spirit is not only the spirit from God as it animates man. It is at the same time the human spirit, in which his personality and his self-awareness consist. When the spirit returns to God, the human spirit, that is, the person (not only the life of the body), returns to God, and God receives him, whether for judgment or for blessing.

The human spirit is not bound to the body and does not pass away like the body in death. When the psalmist says that the spirit departs and returns to the earth (Psalm 146:4),¹³⁴ one cannot conclude from this that the person is bound to the body and that what makes up the “I” becomes earth. The person of man is bound to his spirit (1 Corinthians 5:5) and does not cease to exist when the body dies and decays.

The New Testament shows us how the spirit of Jairus’s daughter returned to the dead girl (Luke 8:55; James 2:26) and how Stephen committed his spirit into the hands of the Lord Jesus (Acts 7:59; cf. Luke 23:46; Psalm 31:5). In this sense Peter also speaks of the spirits who are now in prison (1 Peter 3:19). On the one hand they are the persons themselves; on the other hand, because they have died, they are in a spiritual, that is, nonmaterial state (Hebrews 12:23).

3.2.3 Summary

The Bible’s concept of spirit differs fundamentally from the concept of spirit in other views of man. The spirit raises the human soul to a spirit-soul and makes man a person. It is the guarantor of man’s identity. The spirit distinguishes man, as the image of God, from the animal. Because man has a spirit, God can address him, and he can address God. It is of eternal existence, because it is the spirit that comes from God. Man is thus a being made for eternity, related to a higher, invisible world.

133. Cf. section 1.7.1.

134. This passage in the Psalms is proof that the term “spirit” has different meanings and here, for example, simply means “breath.”

3.3 The Human Soul

Between the spirit and the body of man, Paul names the soul. In Scripture, spirit and soul are a number of times closely connected with each other, so that each term on its own (1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 1:27) can denote the inner man (2 Corinthians 4:16; Psalm 103:1), that is, the immaterial and invisible aspect of man. And yet these two terms are also distinguished from each other (Hebrews 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:23).

It has often been wrongly pointed out that the *soul* simply means life, as it animates the material organism of man and animal (see Matthew 2:20; 16:25-26; Luke 12:22). The word *soul* has this meaning too, but it has a variety of meanings comparable to that of the word *spirit*.

The *soul* is often distinguished from the mere meaning “life.” For the *soul*, like the spirit, is an essential component of man (Job 19:2; Proverbs 3:21-22; Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:20; 2 Peter 2:8).

For example, the well-being of the soul is contrasted with the well-being of the body and its life and thus clearly distinguished from it (3 John 2). People can kill the body, but not the soul (Matthew 10:28). If the soul in this verse were life, it would be killed together with the life of the body. In this passage the Lord Jesus clearly characterizes the soul as an essential element of man that is not dead when the body dies. According to the words of the Lord Jesus, the soul is clearly distinguished as an element of man from his spirit and his body (Luke 17:33; cf. 1 Peter 2:25; Acts 14:22).

As part of man, the soul, along with the spirit, is also the expression for man in his wholeness. The Bible therefore uses the term “soul” when people are counted (cf. Genesis 46:25-27; Acts 2:41).

Together with the spirit, the soul forms the personality in man (Luke 9:24; Hebrews 6:19; 10:39). Like the spirit, it stands for the “I” of man (2 Corinthians 1:23; Isaiah 53:11; Lamentations 3:24).

If the soul occupies a certain intermediate position between spirit and body, then on the one hand it is related to the spirit, which is why we also call it the “spirit-soul.” On the other hand, it stands in close connection with the body, the outer man.

The relationship of the soul to the body is clearly expressed when we read that the soul of the flesh is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11; Deuteronomy 12:23).

The soul of man and of the animal is connected with the blood (Genesis 9:4-5). That is why the death of a person is also described as the pouring out of the soul (Psalm 141:8; Isaiah 53:12). For all its difference from the body, the soul nevertheless stands in very close connection with it, which does not apply in this form to the spirit. That is why it says at the creation of man that he became a living soul, just as the animal is also called a living soul (Genesis 1:20-21, 24; 2:19; 9:10).

The fact that man in his wholeness became a living soul brings out precisely the close relationship between soul and body, for there it was a matter of bringing earth, dead matter, to life. In this sense, and in no other, the animal is also called a “living soul.” The soul of the animal was not breathed into it by the Creator, which is precisely the case with man. Herein lies the essential difference between animal and man (Leviticus 24:17-18).

In the Old Testament the corpse is also called a “soul” (in Hebrew) (Numbers 5:2; 6:6, 11; 19:11, 13). Here the soul denotes the body and the form of the person. So the body is at the same time also the outward form of the soul, but not its substance; that is, the corpse is not the soul. It cannot be, because the soul departs when a person dies (Genesis 35:18). With regard to the dead human body, the term “soul” means the purely bodily, material form of the soul, but without the soul.

This close connection between the body and the soul suggests that even after a person's death the soul is bound to the form and shape of “its” human body. The soul accordingly appears in “bodily form” (in the sense of Luke 3:22). This “body” of the intermediate state is, however, no longer material. Thus after death the soul also appears in human form and can be recognized as such.

In this light it is understandable that John sees the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God (Revelation 6:9; 20:4). If the soul were only life, what would he have seen? He evidently saw human forms, which he recognized as such. Nothing more than this – namely, that John recognized the souls as human forms – can be inferred about their spiritual bodily nature in the world that is invisible to us. The point here is to make clear that recognizability after death has something to do with a person's outward appearance, just as it does on earth through the material body.

These reflections on the continued existence of the soul after death also touch on the question of immortality. That the soul survives the death of the

body has been clearly established. Whether it is immortal, that is, of eternal existence, can only be answered in its connection with the spirit. Since the spirit, which is immortal, dwells in the soul and stands in inseparable connection with it in the constitution of man, and since the two terms often express one and the same thing, the human soul as spirit-soul must also be immortal. It is not immortal in itself, because only God is immortal in Himself. It is immortal because God sustains it, and because He wills that it live and not die.

3.3.1 Summary

Although it is not possible to formulate a definition because of the many-layered meanings of the word “soul” (755 times in the Old Testament), precisely this richness allows us to conclude: The human soul is one of man’s essential elements. It is a spirit-soul and as such differs from the soul of the animal, which is not a *spirit*-soul. It is the link between the spirit and the body. It is the seat of the personality and of individual personal life. Through the spirit dwelling in it, it is immortal and preserves man as a person beyond the death of the body. Here, too – as with the human spirit – it becomes clear that man is a being made for eternity.

3.4 The Human Body

The body, too, is an essential element of man. The visible part of man is far more accessible to our understanding than his invisible part and therefore causes us fewer difficulties. God has given a body as He has chosen (1 Corinthians 15:38). The body is an expression of God’s wisdom – even after the Fall – and fills us with wonder again and again at the marvelous way in which we have been made (Psalm 139). The body of flesh and blood (Hebrews 2:14) makes possible and shapes our existence in the visible world. With the body we experience, perceive, and sense the world.

Through death, which broke into this world through sin, the body, the flesh, is subjected to death and transience (Romans 6:23; Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24). From the standpoint of the natural man, which does not reach beyond death, man – as the Preacher says – meets the same fate as the beasts: he returns to dust (Ecclesiastes 3:19). The outer man is wasting away (2 Corinthians 4:16), just as the present form of the world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31; Isaiah 51:6), that is, as everything visible passes away (2 Corinthians 4:18).

The body has also become the instrument of sin (Romans 6). That is why Paul, speaking of the helplessness of man enslaved under sin, says: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).

This does not mean, however, that the body is a prison from which one is set free only by death. That is a view of Greek philosophy, which is completely opposed to the Bible’s view of the body (cf. section 4). The value the body has in God’s eyes becomes clear in the greatest mystery of world history: God Himself became man – God manifested in the flesh (1 Timothy 3:16).

John says that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The Lord Jesus had a body prepared for Himself (Hebrews 10:5) in order to give it into death as a sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:10). When He died, He did not lay aside forever His body, which He had offered as a sacrifice. In the resurrection, because He is fully man and remains so forever, He received a body that is glorified and that is at the same time the pattern for all believers when, at the transformation and the resurrection, they are clothed with the same body of glory (Philippians 3:21; Romans 8:23).

Through redemption the body of believers has become the dwelling place of God (1 Corinthians 6:19), because God the Holy Spirit dwells in it. So the body, although mortal through sin, is the instrument through which God is now glorified on earth (Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 6:20). The whole person is placed in the service of God.

The resurrection of believers is the proof that God neither rejects the body nor leaves it behind because He might prefer some other form of existence. What once came forth perfect from the hand of God, but was disfigured and corrupted by sin, will one day, on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, be restored to the glory of God.

The adoption of believers as sons is only fully attained when the body is redeemed (Romans 8:23).

Spirit and soul and body, the whole person, are designed for eternity from creation onward. The body will share in immortality only in the resurrection. The term “immortality,” as the opposite of “mortality,” applies only to the *risen* body (Romans 8:11), because through sin it has become a “mortal” body. That is why Scripture does not speak of “the immortality of the soul”: the soul was neither mortal nor has it become so, as is certainly the case with the body.

3.5 Conclusion

It is indisputable: the Bible knows man in the *unity* of spirit, soul, and body. Even though man has fallen from his destiny of living in fellowship with God, the biblical view of man as it presents itself from creation remains intact (James 3:9).

In saying this I emphasize that the three aspects form an inseparable unity and present man in his wholeness, which is preserved until death. Death brings about a temporary separation of body and spirit-soul. Through the resurrection this unity of man is restored.

Man is a being made for eternity. This does not mean only one part of man, but the whole person in his unity and, at the same time, in his diversity with regard to his various aspects, as God intended and carried out from the beginning.

Questions for Further Study

- Why is the biblical view of man unique?
- Name terms that the Bible uses for its view of man.
- Which is the central term, and why?
- Why is the human spirit immortal?
- Name some main characteristics of the human spirit!
- Name some main characteristics of the soul!
- Name some main characteristics of the human body!

4 The Immortality of the Soul

Since I have already used the term “immortality of the soul” frequently, I now want to devote a chapter of its own to it, so that unfounded misunderstandings and, sadly, also false insinuations can be cleared out of the way.

This term polarizes many Christians. Throughout church history down to the present day it has led to extensive and heated discussions. And yet it has gained general acceptance in Christendom, which in itself does not yet confirm that it is correct. Tracing the understanding of the immortality of the soul through church history would be an extensive and interesting topic. That is not my intention, however, because the different positions, which crystallized early on, have remained essentially the same to this day.¹³⁵

It is remarkable that the Bible neither uses the term “immortality of the soul” nor speaks directly about the fact. The absence of this term or a paraphrase of it is, however, no reason to reject the truth it contains. In the same way we speak of the triunity (Trinity) of God, of the substitution of Christ, or of the old nature, although Scripture does not mention these terms either. Nevertheless, they express truths in a way that is not only correct but also useful.

Those who reject the immortality of the soul rightly point out that we are dealing here with a pagan term, in this case a Greek one. The Greeks had the immortality of the soul in their thinking. Incidentally, they also used the term “Hades” for the place of the dead and for the god of the realm of the dead.

But whoever rejects a conscious life after death and in eternity solely because of the origin of the term “immortality of the soul” falls off the horse on the other side. The fight against the influence of Greek thought is at times so fierce that any immortality apart from that of God Himself is denied outright, and the baby is thrown out with the bathwater, so to speak.

I do not want to insist on this term here, defend its terminology, or even Christianize it. The point is how we must understand the immortality of the

135. E.g., *Texte der Kirchenväter*, München (Kösel Verlag), 1966, vols. 1, 4, 5.

soul in the biblical sense.¹³⁶ On no account may we open the door even a crack to pagan philosophy.

“The immortality of the soul” means that the soul, in contrast to the body, does not die (Matthew 10:28). Could it not be that the Greeks possessed a certain degree of truth, grounded in the fact that God has set eternity in the human heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11)? Belief in a life after death was part of all ancient cultures. People know the truth, but they hold it in unrighteousness and suppress it, because their hearts are darkened (Romans 1:18-32).¹³⁷

4.1 Eternal Life and the Immortality of the Soul

One objection to the immortality of the soul is expressed in the question: Why does man still need eternal life if he possesses a *natural* immortality of the soul?

This question makes it clear that eternal life and the immortality of the soul are understood as one and the same thing. That is a wrong understanding, for the two are fundamentally different from each other (cf. 2.9.2). Every human being is born with an immortal soul. But since, as a descendant of Adam, he is a sinner, his whole being is permeated by sin. That is why he needs “new” life. My answer to this question is: in “addition” to his immortal soul, or his eternal existence, man needs eternal life. Because by nature, as a creature, he already has an eternal existence, he does not need a life without end a second time, for he already has that. He needs “eternal life,” which is much more than mere eternal existence. He needs a “new” existence, which he receives with eternal life. He becomes a child of God, because he is born again for this (John 1:12-13; 3:1-21).

The person who does not possess eternal life nevertheless has an eternal existence. But it is an eternal existence without God. In his earthly life he lives without God, he dies without God, and after being raised he will go on living forever without God. So the question is not whether man exists forever, but in what relationship to God he exists forever. Every human being has an eternal existence; the believer, as a child of God, has through eternal life a new and

136. How is the Bible reader who neither knows the thinking of the Greeks nor has any knowledge of the original languages to understand the passages of Scripture that we examined in section 2? For him “the immortality of the soul” is no Trojan horse, no infiltration of pagan ideas; rather, he can very well understand this term biblically within the framework of what was worked out in section 2, and use it in this sense. In the light of the New Testament the term is justified; it need not necessarily carry pagan ideas.

137. See also Don Richardson, *Enigkeit in ihren Herzen*, Lahr (Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission), 1999.

eternal existence in fellowship with God. The unbeliever has an eternal existence without God, because sin separates him from God.

4.2 Immortality in the New Testament

The word “immortality” (Greek: *atanasia*) occurs only three times in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 6:16 it says that God “alone has immortality.” God possesses immortality in an absolute sense in Himself. Immortality is an attribute that, in this form, only God possesses.¹³⁸ No one gave it to Him, and no one can take it from Him. It is His essential property, because He is the “eternally Existing One” (Exodus 3:13-14) and the unchanging God (Romans 16:26). That is why all immortality derives from Him; only He can give it.

From this one could now draw the conclusion that no one except God is immortal. The Lord Jesus, however, says of the angels that they do not die (Luke 20:36); in other words, they are immortal. Can anyone besides God have immortality, then? Is that not a contradiction of the fact that God “alone” has immortality? No, angels are not immortal in the same sense as God. They do not have this property in themselves or independently of God. They, too, are kept alive by God, as is true of everything that lives. All things are upheld by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). In this sense all life, and with it also “immortality,” is derived from God and dependent on Him. Everything that lives lives because He wills it (Revelation 4:11; 1 Timothy 6:13; Acts 17:25). This also applies to the spirit-soul of man. The question is not whether anyone besides God can be immortal, but in what way he is.

The apostle Paul uses the term twice more in his chapter on the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:53-54). There immortality refers exclusively to the new body that believers receive in the resurrection or transformation. Only with this new body do believers receive immortality in its biblical meaning.

Thus in Scripture immortality always refers to the whole person. But it begins only with the resurrection. It then encompasses the whole person and not only his soul. To put it plainly: Scripture does not use the term immortality in connection with the soul. On the other hand, however, it nowhere says that the soul dies when it is presented as an essential element of man. Because

138. It is remarkable that it does not say that God is immortal. It only makes sense to speak of immortality after death has entered creation. It is the opposite of “mortal.” Perhaps it is not appropriate to say that God is immortal, for He never had anything to do with death. He “has” immortality not because this is His nature, but because He gives it to mortal beings.

immortality refers only to the body, mortality also applies only to the body. Since the soul is not mortal, however, there is also no immortality of the soul. Nor did it receive immortality only later through receiving eternal life, as some claim.

In the New Testament, mortality applies only to the body (Romans 6:12; 8:11; 1 Corinthians 15:53-54; 2 Corinthians 4:11; 5:4). The body is mortal and therefore belongs to the visible and thus transient creation (2 Corinthians 4:18). Of the soul, which we do not see, it holds true that, in contrast to the body, it is eternal.

The term “immortality of the soul” is therefore not really accurate. My concern is not to defend this term, but the truth it expresses. It would be better to speak of the “eternal existence of the soul.” If I continue to use the term “immortality of the soul” and even use it as the title of the book, I do so for the sake of better communication.

The eternal existence of man encompasses not only the eternal existence of the soul, but also that of the body (in the resurrection). Man in his wholeness is designed for eternity. The fact that the term “immortality of the soul” addresses only the one aspect of the soul out of the whole of man is due to its referring only to the time between death and resurrection. Within the biblical framework, then, the term is valid only for this period. Any further meaning would be an adoption of the Greek idea, which must be rejected completely.

4.3 Between Death and Resurrection

In the time between death and resurrection the spirit-soul is without a body. The body decays and will be brought forth again only in the resurrection. Here some object that the soul cannot have an independent existence without the body, because without the body and its senses there can be no consciousness. The unity of man, they say, is such that death puts an end to *all* human functions.

4.3.1 Consciousness of the Soul without the Body

The state of man after death is completely abnormal, since death breaks the unity of man. Death separates the spirit-soul from the body. The spirit-soul must now “manage” without the body. It is obvious that this state is not perfect. But that does not prove that the spirit-soul would have no consciousness

without the body. In the visible world we need the body and the senses in order to have consciousness. But we cannot transfer this to the world beyond death, which is invisible to us and of an entirely different kind.

From the texts discussed in section 2 it has become clear that after death there are no limitations for the soul and its consciousness without the body. The consciousness of the soul after death is not bound to the body. Functions such as speaking and hearing, which can actually be assigned only to the body, also apply to the “souls” of those who had been slain (Revelation 6:9; cf. section 2.9). Even if we cannot imagine the state of the soul without the body, we must not for that reason rule out the existence of such a state. Just think of the angels: they are spirits (Hebrews 1:7, 14) who have no body. And yet they have a personal consciousness.

The apostle Paul thought it possible that he was “out of the body” when he was caught up into the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

4.3.2 Does the Soul Still Need a Body?

Another argument runs: “If the human soul lives on after death and the soul of the believer enters paradise, why is a resurrection still necessary? Why do we need a body if we attain a blessed form of existence even without it?”

Here, too, I emphasize that the time between death and resurrection represents an absolutely exceptional situation. One could say that man was not created for this time. Death was, humanly speaking, not intended. It was not God’s will that man should die. That is why the state after death cannot be called perfect, even if the believers are in paradise. Their body has fallen prey to death.

This argument leads us back once again to the truth, already discussed several times, about the value of the body created by God and about the unity of man. This work of God has been destroyed by death. But death can be overcome and abolished only through the resurrection.

Just as incomplete as the work of Jesus Christ would be without His resurrection (Romans 4:25), so incomplete would redemption be (Romans 8:23) if the body of believers who have died were to remain behind in the grave. Death would have won if there were no resurrection. The resurrection is about the honor and glorification of God, which would be diminished without the resurrection.

After His death Christ went into paradise (cf. section 2.3). But He did not remain there, although it is a place of the greatest blessedness. He has risen from the dead. Our salvation stands or falls with His resurrection. Without His resurrection there would be no justification and no peace with God. This does not contradict the fact that He went into paradise and that His spirit-soul did not die. Here we see that the immortality of the soul and the resurrection do not exclude or cancel each other out. So the immortality of the soul in the biblical sense does not make the resurrection meaningless. If, however, one believes in the immortality of the soul in the Greek sense, one really does not need a resurrection. The concept of immortality in Greek philosophy has nothing in common with biblical immortality, as the following comparison shows.

4.4 Immortality in the Bible and in Greek Philosophy

The strongest argument brought against the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is its pagan origin. The Greek idea of immortality received its best-known form in Plato, although belief in an immortality of the soul existed long before the Greeks, for example among the Babylonians.

Did Christendom adopt the Greek idea of immortality and mix it with biblical teaching? Sadly, we must acknowledge that this was indeed the case. Here I must concede that those who reject the immortality of the soul are right. That is why a clear dividing line must be drawn and any mixing must be rejected.

By means of the contrasts between Greek thought and the Christian hope of resurrection, combined with the *biblical* concept of immortality, I will make clear that I am making no compromise with paganism. The differences listed in four points (these are certainly not all there are) should suffice to show how incompatible the two ideas are. They have completely opposite starting points and endpoints.

4.4.1 Dualism

Greek philosophy divides man into two substances: body and soul, or matter and spirit. From a biblical point of view this division would still be

permissible¹³⁹ if it were a division of equals. But it is not, for the Greeks regarded the soul and the spiritual as higher than the body, and they considered the body the prison of the soul. For them, therefore, death was liberation from the prison, through which the soul found true life. For them there was a rift between spirit and matter.

In the Bible, starting from the creation of man, the body is never secondary, since it is a creation of God and therefore good (cf. section 3.3). Even though sin has brought about death, it remains true that the body of the believer is the temple in which God Himself dwells (1 Corinthians 6:19). With his body the believer is a member of the body of Christ.

4.4.2 The Resurrection

The Greeks knew of no resurrection of the body, because it did not fit into their thinking (Acts 17:32-34). After all, a resurrection of the body would put the soul back into the prison of the body.

The body is not something from which the soul must be set free. This is made clear by the fact of the resurrection. God Himself will restore the body in the resurrection.

When Christians believe that the spirit-soul exists eternally, they are not thereby giving up the resurrection. The resurrection is neither replaced nor excluded by the immortality of the soul in its biblical meaning. The two belong together absolutely, and in such a way that the one does not exist without the other.

Because God created the human spirit-soul immortal, He made possible a bodily resurrection in which the person remains identical. The resurrection is therefore not a new creation out of a nothingness into which man falls at his death, but the reuniting of the spirit-soul with the body. It is God's will that the personal identity of each individual human being be preserved and continued in the resurrection.

Thus the resurrection of the dead is the prerequisite for the immortality of the soul. If there were no resurrection, there would be no immortality of the soul either. God's plan encompasses man in his wholeness. Therefore there can be no eternal existence of the soul without the body. God will restore the unity of man.

139. As the "inner" and "outer" man.

From sources already cited, we know that the Pharisees were convinced of the immortality of the soul and believed in the resurrection. They, too, were exposed to Hellenistic influence, but the resurrection was part of their faith, grounded in the Old Testament. For them it was no problem and no contradiction to recognize the connection between the immortality of the soul and the resurrection.

The immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead are not opposites. According to biblical teaching they belong together (cf. section 2.2); each presupposes the other. This is neither a compromise nor a hybrid of Christian doctrine and pagan ideas.

4.4.3 The Immortality of the Soul Is Not the Final State

For the Greeks the soul reaches its final destiny after death; it is the “divine” in man that returns to God. Because according to the Bible there is a resurrection, the soul has not yet reached its ultimate destiny after death. The doctrine of the immortality of the soul, from a biblical point of view, does not describe an eternal final state. After death it is a matter of a provisional state of the soul that lasts only until the resurrection. Death has brought about a temporary “exceptional situation,” which will be abolished thanks to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

4.4.4 Personality

The Greeks believed in the preexistence of the soul: just as the soul, as a divine spark, returns to God after death, so, they held, it also existed in God before the person was conceived. They regarded the soul as part of a supernatural “world soul.” After laying aside the prison of the body, the soul gave up its individuality again.

Here lies a decisive difference from the Bible’s concept of the soul. There, through God’s creation, the soul is the seat and expression of each person’s personality. The soul is an individual spirit-soul and remains so forever. Its existence begins not before, but with the history of the individual, without ever ending.

In view of these serious differences, can the charge still be maintained that Christians mean the same thing as the Greeks when they speak of the

immortality of the soul? Have they simply adopted pagan ideas? The differences mentioned should make it sufficiently clear that this is not the case.

4.5 Conclusion

Below I summarize in three points why I believe that every human being has an eternal existence, to which, according to biblical teaching, an eternal spirit-soul also belongs.

- The human spirit is the spirit of life breathed in by God Himself (cf. section 3.1). Because this spirit is from God and at the same time forms the human spirit, the human spirit-soul must, like the Spirit of God Himself, exist eternally. This existence rests solely on the will of God, who keeps everything alive.
- Then we examined in detail the testimony of Scripture regarding the state after death (sections 2.1-10). It became clear that when a person dies, he does not cease to exist, but lives on. How are we to explain this fact? The most conclusive explanation is that the human spirit-soul is not subject to bodily death.
- Besides the people who possess eternal life, there are those who do not possess it. These are the unbelievers, of whom the Lord Jesus says that they will go away into eternal torment. This torment, like the eternal joy of the believers, is without end, that is, eternal (Matthew 18:8; 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Hebrews 6:2). The wrath of God remains on the lost forever (John 3:36; cf. section 6.2).

René Pache¹⁴⁰ aptly sums up this subject:

Man receives

- at his birth, with his soul, existence without end
- at his new birth ... eternal life
- at his resurrection, with his body, immortality

The immortality of the soul is not a suppression of the reality of death, but an essential component of human existence as Holy Scripture describes it.

140. René Pache, *Das Jenseits*, Wuppertal (Verlag Sonne und Schild), 1957.

4.6 The Significance of This Truth

This important truth is of great significance for the proclamation of the gospel. Precisely in the fact that every human being has an immortal soul lies the incentive to reach people with the gospel. Paul says: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others” (2 Corinthians 5:11). For unbelieving and unrepentant people, the judgment throne of Christ will be the moment when the verdict that seals their eternal destiny is pronounced over them (Romans 14:10-12; Revelation 20:11-15). That is why every Christian should be gripped by the necessity of proclaiming the gospel: “For woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Questions for Further Study

- Why is the immortality of the soul often rejected?
- Is this rejection justified?
- What is the biblical meaning of the immortality of the soul?
- What is the difference between eternal life and the immortality of the soul?
- Which people have an immortal soul?
- Which people have eternal life?
- Can the soul have consciousness without the body, and why?
- Does the soul need a body at all, and why?
- What differences are there between the Greek and the biblical understanding of the immortality of the soul?

5 The Future of the Dead

In the previous chapters it has become clear that man, whether a believer or not, has not yet reached the final state at his death. The state immediately after death, which a person experiences consciously, is of limited duration. That is why it is an intermediate state, a way station on the road to eternity. Yet from the beginning of the intermediate state it is already clear to the dead where they will spend eternity, because this period is already marked by what will be their portion in eternity: torment on the one side and joy on the other.

God has something magnificent in store for the believers, the children of God. His purpose is to glorify them and to conform them to the image of His Son (Romans 8:17, 29-30). This applies to all believers – regardless of whether they are still alive when Christ returns or have already died. Death cannot stop God's purpose, because death has been abolished in the resurrection of Christ.

It is different with those who have died unreconciled and without peace with God. They, too, have a future. They are not annihilated in death, for they have an immortal spirit-soul. But their future will be terrible. In the words of the Bible, they are “lost.” For them, too, the intermediate state will end, and then they will be brought before the Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25) for the pronouncement of the verdict.

The future of believers and that of unbelievers differ fundamentally. This also concerns the chronological sequence of events. We will therefore follow two lines in order to see how God reaches His goal with believers and with unbelievers.

The intermediate state is marked by the separation of the spirit-soul from the body. Because God always has the whole person in view, this cannot be the final state. That is why the resurrection – the restoration of the unity of man – is the next great event that the dead will experience.

5.1 The Resurrection

The resurrection ends the state of death, that is, the separation of the body from the spirit-soul. It is God's purpose, grounded in creation, to restore man

in his wholeness, that is, consisting of spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

This restoration in the resurrection is not a new creation out of nothing, as if man had completely passed away and been extinguished in his death. When Adam returned to dust after his death, this did not affect the “whole” Adam, but only his mortal body, which had been made from the dust of the ground. His spirit-soul did not pass away like the mortal body. Nor could it, because God’s breath of life was in it.

So the human spirit-soul lives on after death, separated from the body, until the moment when God reunites it with its body in the resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

The continued existence of the spirit-soul until the resurrection is the reason and the prerequisite for each person’s personal identity being preserved in the resurrection as well. This means that in the resurrection a person is exactly the same person who once lived on earth. The personality of man – to which spirit, soul, and body belong – as God has given it to each person (cf. Psalm 33:15; Isaiah 45:9; Romans 9:20-21), is not lost. It is neither changed nor created anew, but is preserved. So no other person will come forth from the grave, although the body will be new. Is it not wonderful how valuable each person is to God as a personality!?

The proof of this is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord who rose from the dead was the same as the One who died on the cross. His death as a man was also the separation of His spirit-soul from the body. He – that is, His spirit-soul (Acts 2:27, 31) – went at His death into paradise, into heaven to His Father (Luke 23:43, 46). His body was in the tomb for three days. There was therefore no doubt that He had really died. In His resurrection this separation was undone, so that now, as man in resurrection, He takes first place as the firstborn among many brothers (Romans 8:29).

And yet, as far as the body is concerned, the resurrection is like a new creation. Only God, the Lord over life and death, can bring this about. It is as at creation: “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:9). It is God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). Only He can bring forth the decayed body again with the characteristics that were peculiar to each individual person.

In this the greatness of God's power and the might of His strength are displayed (Ephesians 1:19-20).

5.1.1 The Resurrection in the Old Testament

The resurrection of the dead was already people's hope in Old Testament times. Thus Abraham found the courage to obey God and to sacrifice his only son, because "he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19; cf. Genesis 22; Romans 4:17). Isaiah says: "Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!" (Isaiah 26:19). Daniel says: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). Ezekiel says: "Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel" (Ezekiel 37:12; see also vv. 5 and 6).

The resurrection (whether the national resurrection of the people or that of the body) was part of the faith of the believing Israelite (Hebrews 6:2; Acts 26:6-8; Job 19:25-27). In contrast to the Sadducees, the Pharisees in particular were known for this hope of resurrection; they believed that at the coming of the Messiah, when He established His kingdom, there would be a resurrection of the dead (Acts 23:6).

The fact of the resurrection, however, takes concrete shape only with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for His resurrection is the foundation for the resurrection of the dead as such: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:21). Because He died as a man and rose as a man, the resurrection of man is assured. This applies especially to believers, because they are united with Christ, the risen One, both in life and in death (Romans 14:8-9).

Yet the resurrection is not expressly limited to the redeemed; it is the portion of every human being, including the one who has not believed (John 5:29; Acts 24:15).¹⁴¹ But the resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the unrighteous are fundamentally different from each other, both in their timing and in their character. Scripture clearly teaches that there is a first resurrection, the resurrection of life, which concerns only the redeemed, and for "the rest" a last resurrection, that of judgment (Revelation 20:5). Therefore there will be no

141. However, it is said only of believers that they will be made alive.

“general” resurrection on “the last day” (John 11:24) at which all people without exception will rise at the same time.

5.1.2 The Resurrection of Life

The resurrection of life denotes the resurrection of believers, because it comes about through, and is marked by, the resurrection life of the Son of God (Romans 6:9-10). At the tomb of Lazarus, who had died, He said: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). He is the resurrection and the life in person. Without Him there would be neither the resurrection nor life beyond death! Believers will rise because they possess the life of the Lord Jesus as their life.

A further reason why believers who have died will rise is that the Holy Spirit dwells in them: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:11).

The same Spirit who was in Jesus (Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 9:14) and showed Himself in power when He rose (Romans 1:4; 1 Peter 3:18) also dwells in us (1 Corinthians 6:19; 1 Thessalonians 4:8; 1 John 4:13). That is why the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2) will also be at work in the raising of believers who have died. The Holy Spirit is the pledge and thus the guarantee that believers will be raised (2 Corinthians 5:5) and will not be left behind when the Lord comes (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

In the resurrection and the transformation the work of redemption in believers will be brought to completion (Romans 8:23; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23). When the Lord Jesus returns as Savior for the believers (1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:15-16; John 14:3) to transform our lowly body, we as redeemed sinners will also bear the image of the man of heaven (Philippians 3:20-21; Titus 2:13; 1 Corinthians 15:49). He is already our Savior (Deliverer; John 4:42), for our sins are forgiven, and He has brought us to God (1 Peter 1:19; 2:24; 3:18). But before the Lord comes, our body does not yet share in this salvation and is still dead because of sin (Romans 8:10; cf. 6:12). The believer’s body is still subject to mortality. That is why we who are alive await Him as Savior for our body.

This also applies to those who have fallen asleep in Christ, in whom the same effective power of the Savior will prove itself irresistibly in their being raised.

Then what has long been seen as complete in God's counsel will also become reality. We will be glorified, and Christ will take the place of the firstborn among the brothers (Romans 8:29-30). He is the head of a new creation (Colossians 1:18), which is the fruit of His resurrection.

In the book of Revelation the apostle John calls the resurrection of life the "first" resurrection: "This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:5-6).

Whoever shares in the first resurrection is called blessed, because the second, eternal death in hell has no power over him. So the unrighteous will not take part in the first resurrection, for they cannot be called blessed and holy. This is the resurrection of the righteous, in which they will be repaid for their righteous deeds (Luke 14:14; 20:35-36; Acts 24:15). The apostle Paul deals in detail with the resurrection of the dead, and especially that of believers, in 1 Corinthians 15. The occasion for this discussion was that some in Corinth were claiming that there is no resurrection of the dead (verse 12). In doing so they had overlooked that this would mean that Christ could not have risen from the dead either – which would have made their faith pointless. After Paul had defended the resurrection of Christ as the foundation of the Christian faith and refuted the false teachers, he went on to explain the nature of the resurrection.

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Christ is presented as the originator of the resurrection of His own. He is united with them forever. He is the head of a new family (Romans 5:12-21). He is their forerunner and pathfinder, having opened for them the door out of death into life. He is now on the other side of death, and death no longer has dominion over Him (Romans 6:9).

The term "firstfruits" expresses a position of preeminence. In terms of time, He is the first of a particular kind of resurrection. For even before His resurrection there were people who had been raised from the dead. But they did not receive a resurrection body; they died again afterward. In His resurrection death is finally defeated. When He raises the believers, they will never die again.

Paul also describes the preeminence of the Lord Jesus in another passage: "And he is ... the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be

preeminent” (Colossians 1:18). His being raised took place “from among” the dead (Mark 9:9; 1 Peter 1:3, 21). Believers, too, will be raised “out from among” the dead; that is, others – the unbelievers – will remain behind for the time being. They do not take part in the first resurrection, but will be called out of their graves only at the “last” resurrection. That is why Scripture clearly distinguishes the “resurrection of the dead” from the “resurrection from [out of] [the] dead” (Luke 20:35; Acts 4:2; Philippians 3:11).

Through one man, Adam, death came into the world and spread to every human being, so that they all die (Romans 5:12, 21). But in Christ death is abolished, because as a man He overcame death – which He Himself first had to taste (Hebrews 2:9) – through His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ from the dead was the only way to defeat death.

1 Corinthians 15 deals only with the resurrection of believers. It is about those who are Christ’s (v. 23), that is, who belong to Him, who are in Him (v. 22), and who will experience the life-giving power of the second man (vv. 45-47). But the unbelievers, too, will be raised. They have no connection with Christ. He will exercise His power as the risen One on them by calling them out of their graves to judgment (John 5:29). This display of the power of the Son of Man belongs to the conclusion of God’s ways with the first creation (Revelation 21:4). In the end He will also do away forever with the last enemy, death.

This event also includes the resurrection of the unrighteous, because in the doing away with death their (bodily) death is also ended. So the resurrection of unbelievers is included in 1 Corinthians 15, even though it is not addressed directly. This resurrection remains in the background as a necessary event. Unbelievers have no part in the Lord Jesus’ victory over death, which is described so outstandingly in this chapter.

Questions for Further Study

- Name reasons why believers share in the “resurrection of life”!
- Distinguish this from the resurrection of unbelievers!

5.1.3 The Body in the Resurrection

The nature of the resurrection body is difficult to describe because there is nothing comparable by which we could picture this new body. We know only

the body we have now. It is “flesh and blood”; it is a natural body, made from the dust of the earth. Through sin it is subject to mortality and corruption.

Paul says that “flesh and blood” cannot inherit the heavenly kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50). That is why a transformation of the earthly body is necessary. God gives the believers – those who have fallen asleep in being raised, the living in being changed – a heavenly body (1 Corinthians 15:40, 48-50). This body will correspond to the conditions of heavenly life.

So without doubt it must be a different body from the present one. And yet it will bear a resemblance to the present one. There will be a continuity in which the form of the person remains. Think of the Lord as the risen One. The disciples recognized Him. It was He whom they had followed. Even the wounds of His crucifixion were still visible.¹⁴²

This resemblance is also expressed by Paul. He says that our mortal bodies will be given life. The mortal body we now have will be brought to life again and will receive immortality in the resurrection.

In the same way Scripture emphasizes that it will be a different body. From the comparison of the resurrection with sowing it becomes clear that what grows out of the earth is something other than the seed that was put into the earth. This image, too, again makes clear that there is a resemblance and continuity: the seed and the fruit that comes forth from it are “essentially” the same, because they are one and the same plant.

We must keep both of these aspects (resemblance and difference) in view. The person, who is bound to the body we now have, is preserved and will be recognizable as such. But the kind of body will be completely new. This can be compared with the old and the new creation. The new creation, too, will resemble the old creation, although at the same time it will be completely new (Revelation 21:1).

The greatest thing about this new body is the fact that we will be like Him, the Son of God (1 John 3:2). Paul says: “It is raised in glory” (1 Corinthians 15:43). Everything will bear the stamp of Christ’s glory. That is the glory He received when He ascended into heaven and was glorified. Being like the Lord refers to His outward glory. So when we appear with Him, we will bear the

142. This will surely be an exception, since they are the wounds of His work of redemption (cf. the Lamb as though it had been slain, or with the mortal wound; Revelation 5). In my opinion, believers will not have any wound marks on their resurrection body.

image of the *man of heaven* (1 Corinthians 15:49; Philippians 3:20-21). That is why He will be marveled at in those who have believed (2 Thessalonians 1:10).

Because death is defeated, the new body will no longer be mortal (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). Regarding the body that has died, it says that it will put on *imperishability*. The body that has died has decayed. That will never again happen to the new body. Regarding the body of the living, which has not yet died, it says that it will put on immortality. Death shall be no more (Revelation 21:4)!

These marks, too – the imperishability and immortality of the new body – are those of the risen Son of God: “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again” (Romans 6:9). The Lord Jesus says that the righteous will no longer die in the resurrection. They are equal to angels, who are immortal (Luke 20:36).

In this context the Lord also says that in the resurrection there will no longer be any marital relationship and therefore no reproduction. This does not mean that the distinction between the sexes will also disappear. This distinction remains in that God preserves the personality of man, to which being a man or a woman belongs.

The natural body was created for the earth. It is therefore shaped and determined by its connection with the earth. It was subject to the laws and living conditions of the earth. In the resurrection, however, we will receive a “spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:44). It will no longer be subject to the conditions of the earth. This becomes clear in the body of the Lord Jesus in the resurrection. It was not bound to space and time. The Lord passed through locked doors. In the disciples’ estimation, this could only be a spirit. But the Lord says that a spirit does not have the characteristics of a body of flesh and bones. The disciples could touch Him, and He even ate the broiled fish (Luke 24:36-43).

Question for Further Study

- List some characteristics of the resurrection body!

5.1.4 The Time of the Resurrection

So there will not be a general, simultaneous resurrection of all the dead at the end of days. Scripture clearly distinguishes the time of the resurrection of the righteous from the time of the resurrection of the unrighteous. The very fact

that there is a resurrection of believers “from” the dead, at which the rest of the dead are not yet raised, already points to this. The designation “first” resurrection (Revelation 20:5) also makes clear that there will later be a “second” or “last” resurrection.

The assumption that there is only *one* general resurrection at the end of days, followed by a judgment, is inferred from the words of the Lord Jesus: “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out: those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29).

From the term “hour” it is concluded that there can be only *one* general resurrection. Here the hour is understood as a point in time. But in this passage we have to think of a span of time that extends over a longer period. John often speaks of an “hour” in this sense (John 4:21, 23; 5:25; 16:2, 25; 1 John 2:18; Revelation 3:10; 14:7; 17:12). These verses show clearly that the hour does not denote a point in time or a unit of time of sixty minutes, but an epoch that on the one hand lasts much longer than an hour and on the other is marked by particular characteristics and events.

In John 5:25 the Lord speaks of an hour that cannot be limited to a period of sixty minutes but encompasses the time of grace, which has now already lasted two thousand years, in which the voice of the Son of God calls people out of their spiritual death. In connection with the resurrection, the “hour” extends over a period of at least a thousand years. This figurative meaning of the hour also applies to the “last day” (John 6:39ff.; 11:24). This day does not denote a point in time marking the end of the world; rather, like the hour, it is a span of time, an epoch, in which the various resurrections will take place.

The resurrection of life, that is, that of believers, takes place when Christ comes again. This belongs to the order established by God: “But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; then those who belong to Christ at his coming” (1 Corinthians 15:23). The time of the resurrection of the righteous is here equated with the time of Christ’s coming. This fixes the date precisely. The coming (Greek: *parousia*) of Christ, in turn, takes place at two different points in time. Consequently there are also two or three phases of resurrection within the “first” resurrection: 1. Christ, 2. believers at the Rapture, 3. the martyrs at the beginning of the millennial kingdom.

First the Lord Jesus will come again to take all living believers to Himself in heaven (John 17:24; Philippians 3:20-21), into the Father's house (John 14:2-3). That is His coming for the Rapture of believers, at which the dead in Christ are raised and the living believers are changed (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). The first coming applies only to believers. He does not then come visibly to all people, as will be the case at a later time.

The first coming of Christ is the hope of believers. They wait for the Son of God from heaven, who will deliver them from the coming wrath that will come upon the earth while they are in heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10). The believers from the time of the Old Testament will also belong to this resurrection (Hebrews 11:35, 39-40). Together with the believers of the church, after the resurrection they will be seen in the twenty-four elders who will surround the throne of God and the Lamb in heaven (Revelation 4:4ff.). Those who have been raised are in heaven when the wrath and judgment of God come upon the earth (Revelation 6-19).

Then the Lord Jesus Christ will appear a second time, visibly to all people, in power and glory (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 1:7; 19:11-16). Then too believers will rise. They are those who died after the Rapture. John says of them that they were beheaded for the sake of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus and that they did not worship the beast; they will be made alive (Revelation 20:4).

The first resurrection therefore takes place in two steps:

- first the believers of the church and of the Old Testament
- then the believers who died after the Rapture up to the millennial kingdom

The believers of the first resurrection will be brought into heaven with glorified bodies. There they will dwell forever. They receive a heavenly body with which they have their eternal home not on earth but in heaven.

For the believers who have been raised there will be no more judgment. The question of judgment was settled for them on the cross of Golgotha. It also makes sense that those who have already been made perfect and bear the body of glory are not judged yet again, with the possibility of being lost after all.

Believers will nevertheless appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). But then the question of salvation is not at issue. There it is a matter of assessing their works and of reward (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). There

they will see and assess their lives from God's point of view, so that they will know as they have been known (1 Corinthians 13:12). They will recognize and praise the grace that brought them safely to the goal.

5.1.5 The Resurrection to Judgment

Scripture says little about the resurrection of the unrighteous (Acts 24:15). Some things have already been mentioned in the comparison with the resurrection of life. Scripture speaks of this resurrection as an important event that will take place and with which God will bring the history of the first creation to its close.

This resurrection will take place in a moment and will include all the dead who had no part in the first resurrection, that is, those who were left (Revelation 20:5). Only in this sense could one speak of a general resurrection on the last day.

The Lord Jesus will call the unrighteous out of their graves (John 5:28-29). He calls this resurrection the "resurrection of judgment," because it is marked by judgment. The unrighteous are already judged during their lifetime, because they did not believe (John 3:18). After their resurrection they go into eternal judgment, which begins with the judicial session of the great white throne (Revelation 20:11).

The apostle John speaks of this event in Revelation 20:11-15. He speaks of the *rest* of the dead (Revelation 20:5), who do not come to life until the thousand years of Christ's reign are completed. This also fixes the time of the last resurrection precisely. At the end of this reign (1 Corinthians 15:24) the dead will be summoned. They will rise in order to be brought before the Judge of the living and the dead (Hebrews 12:23; Romans 2:16; 2 Timothy 4:1).

John describes this future event in an impressive way: he first sees a great white throne. It immediately conveys the impression of supreme authority and absolute righteousness and holiness (1 John 1:5). Then he beholds the One who sits on the throne. Before this Person heaven and earth flee. That is the end of the first creation (1 Corinthians 15:24). Earth and heaven flee away (Revelation 20:11) and are dissolved in fire (2 Peter 3:7, 11). Now the old creation must give way to the new creation. What a Person this must be who sets off such an event! And what will the people feel who will stand before this Person!?

Who is it who sits on the throne? It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, to whom God the Father has given all judgment (John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Corinthians 5:10). The Judge is a man who Himself lived on earth and knows human existence perfectly. That is why no one will be able to suggest that He could not judge some human situation from experience.

Then John's gaze moves on, and he sees a great crowd of people standing before the throne. They are all the unbelieving dead who have ever lived on earth. Not a single one has been forgotten. From the least to the greatest, they will all appear there. In this hour of truth no distinctions will be made.

It is striking that these people are still called "dead" after they have been raised. That is not a contradiction, for it has already become clear that only the unrighteous will stand before the great white throne. The first resurrection, that of the righteous, already took place at least a thousand years earlier. If the people before the throne are called "dead" in spite of having been raised, this denotes their lost condition: they are spiritually dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:1), they died physical death as the wages of sin, and after the sentence is pronounced they go into eternal death in full awareness of their guilt and sinfulness (Revelation 20:6, 14).

The evidence for the verdict is the book of life¹⁴³ and the books in which all works are recorded (Daniel 7:10). In the book of life stand all who had a part in the resurrection of life. These will therefore not stand before this throne at all, for their resurrection already took place a thousand years before. It says that all who were not found in the book of life at this judgment were thrown into the lake of fire. So only those who are thrown into the lake of fire stand here!

From John's description one might, however, gather that some also stand before the throne who do not go into the lake of fire, because we find the book of life there. Why is it consulted? The reason is that this judgment proceeds with the utmost precision. Every doubt that might arise there concerning a person's condition is removed. The examination of the book will rule out any mix-up. No one who has life and stands in this book would be thrown into the lake of fire unjustly.

There the human being will be completely convicted and made acquainted with the truth about himself. The other books, in which all deeds are recorded, also serve this purpose. Here it must be especially noted that unbelievers are

143. Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Hebrews 12:23; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19.

judged according to their works. All works – the supposedly good ones and the bad ones – will be looked at, examined, and assessed. Before this Judge a person must admit how corrupt his own life was. This recognition is terrible, for there is no making amends there, and there is no advocate to intercede on his behalf.

No superficial or sweeping verdict will be pronounced. The judgment will be absolutely just and incorruptible, down to every detail, because the righteous and all-knowing Judge carries out the judgment (2 Timothy 4:8; Psalm 7:11; 9:4).

Once more John seems to consider where the many dead come from. He saw how the sea, death, and Hades gave up their dead. Thus no place and no state where dead people could still be found remains exempt. Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, whereby the last enemy, death, comes to its end (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The first death, that is, physical death, will then no longer exist, because after the last resurrection there will no longer be any dead in the sense of the separation of spirit-soul and body. Hades, as the place of the dead, will therefore no longer be needed. The terrible conclusion from this fact is that the unrighteous, that is, the lost, will suffer the second death, the lake of fire, with their bodies. The Lord Jesus says that we should fear Him who “can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). These words show unmistakably that man will go into hell, that is, the lake of fire, with soul and body.

So this second resurrection takes place solely for the purpose of banishing the unrighteous to hell with their bodies. Their destruction will strike not only their souls but also their bodies. Thus, after their resurrection and the judgment, the dead enter the final and eternal state.

Question for Further Study

- Distinguish the various phases (or points in time) of the resurrection of believers and unbelievers!

6 Man in Eternity

The beginning of the eternal state, the beginning of an entirely new creation (Revelation 21:1), is the completion of God's ways with the world. Salvation history is concluded after a long time. In the end God has reached His goal and brought His eternal counsel to completion. He will be glorified in it. He has done everything and given everything so that man, His creature and image, may experience bliss and eternal joy.

If, regarding life after death, we are entirely dependent on the revelation of the Word of God, this also applies when it comes to man in eternity. In this question too we need God's revelation. It is owing to God's great grace that He reveals this to us as well, to such an extent that we can draw important conclusions for our lives from it. It is always God's aim that our occupation with future things should not merely satisfy our curiosity but also have an effect on our daily lives.

In eternity, just as today, there will be two groups of people: those who have life from God and those who have no life from God. Herein lies the connection with our subject, the eternal existence of man, or in other words, the immortality of the soul. If one assumes that man loses his existence after death – even if only temporarily – then the conclusion could be drawn that at some point he loses his existence for good. That is why among those who believe the soul is mortal one finds the view that unbelievers will one day be annihilated. The teachings of the mortality of the soul and of the annihilation of man are usually found together, because the mortality of the soul is, of course, the precondition for the annihilation of man. We have now, however, established on the basis of Holy Scripture that man has an eternal existence and that unbelievers will therefore never be annihilated.

By the following study at the latest it becomes clear that the truth of the immortality of the soul, or of the eternal existence of man, is not incidental or secondary. It must not be swept under the rug for the sake of unity among Christians. If this truth is given up, the picture of biblical teaching is distorted (Romans 6:17) and the message of the gospel is diminished.

6.1 Believers in Eternity

Very few believers doubt that they have an eternal future. Even if there are differing views about the “where” and the “how,” all of them look forward to eternity with joyful expectation. We wait for the coming of the day of God and for a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:11-13).

God has called us in Christ Jesus to His eternal glory (1 Peter 5:10). We are called into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12). An inexpressible glory has been prepared for us that will far surpass our imagination (e.g., Romans 8:18, 21, 29-30; 2 Timothy 2:10).

“In heaven everything that makes life hard for us here on earth will be overcome forever. The inhabitants of this place will never again have to endure pain, sadness, dejection, sickness, death, sin, selfishness, weariness, or suffering, for ‘the former things have passed away’ (cf. Revelation 21:4; 22:3). Heaven will be a place of indescribable love, beauty, peace, joy, adventure, and fellowship with God (Revelation 21:4). We can hardly imagine what an infinitely loving, almighty, and all-knowing God will do in eternity for those for whom He willingly sacrificed His only Son (cf. Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 3:21-23). Life there will far surpass our imagination. If everything negative is absent in heaven, then this place must be filled with everything that is new and positive: ‘And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true”’ (Revelation 21:5).”¹⁴⁴

It is worth the effort to reflect further on these glories and heavenly blessings of the Christian, and I would gladly go on dealing with them now. But the question here is not the eternal existence of believers. No one doubts that. It is different with unbelievers and their future. Here views diverge fundamentally.

6.2 Unbelievers in Eternity

Unbelievers who have not repented and do not have the forgiveness of their sins will die in their sin (John 8:21). After that, judgment awaits them (Hebrews 9:27). They fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31), who is absolutely holy and therefore hates and abhors sin. The resurrection of

144. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Fakten über Sterbeerlebnisse*, Pfäffikon (Verlag Mitternachtsruf), 2001, p. 67.

unbelievers therefore takes place only for judgment (John 5:29). That is an undeniable fact grounded in the statements of the Word of God: the wrath of the holy God will remain on the unbeliever forever (John 3:36).

We ask with the apostle Peter: “What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17-18). God’s Word does not leave us in the dark about this. But before I give an answer to this question, I would like to remind you once more that God our Savior has done everything, in the sacrifice of His only begotten Son, to save lost sinners. It is not God’s will that the sinner should perish (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9), but that he should live and be saved from eternal death. God is concerned for every person and seeks to reach him in His divine love. No one will ever be able to blame God for his eternal destiny. Eternal damnation will strike all those people who did not honor God, the Creator, and rejected His Son.

The apostle Paul speaks of God’s righteous dealings, both in grace and in judgment: “Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and patience and forbearance, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath and of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will repay each one according to his works: to those who by perseverance in good work seek glory and honor and incorruptibility, eternal life; but to those who are contentious and disobedient to the truth, but obedient to unrighteousness, wrath and fury. Tribulation and distress upon every human soul who does evil” (Romans 2:4-9; translated from the German Elberfelder Bible).

Wrath, fury, tribulation, and distress are expressions here for God’s righteous judgment on the unrepentant sinner. Holy Scripture speaks unmistakably about the future and eternal judgment. It does not suppress the reality of God’s wrath against sin, as is unfortunately often done today. The holiness and righteousness of God, which hand the sinner over to hell, do not fit into the thinking of most people, and sadly not into that of many Christians either. All too often people believe, or hope, that God is willing to compromise and would overlook sin in grace. But this assumption helps no one, since it leads a person astray

concerning the nature of God and the nature of sin, and thus also concerning his own eternal destiny.¹⁴⁵

Holy Scripture uses various designations and drastic images or comparisons in order to describe eternal judgment as impressively as possible. They are meant to show man how seriously God takes sin and how much He is to be feared in judgment. The Bible speaks of heaven and hell as really existing places and uses figurative language to describe them. We do not doubt the reality of heaven because it is described in images (see the Revelation of John), and so neither can we doubt the reality of hell.

Let us examine the three essential terms and images that speak of this judgment. They are hell, the lake of fire, and the second death.

6.2.1 Hell (Gehenna)

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself speaks of hell eleven times in the Gospels (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; elsewhere in the New Testament only James 3:6). Hell is the place where the unrighteous are left alone forever in full awareness of their guilt and are judged by God.

It is remarkable that it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself who speaks most about hell, the place of terrible judgment, although He Himself is the revelation of God's love. No one knew the love of God as He did, and He had come to reveal it. But how can God's love be compatible with such a terrible judgment? Because no one knew the holiness of God as He did, either. The apostle John says: "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). The expression *light* stands here for God's holiness in contrast to darkness, an expression for sin and everything connected with it.

The Jews in Jesus' time had a certain idea of what was meant by "hell" (Greek: *gehenna*). This idea was derived from a well-known place and its history. The Greek word corresponds to the Hebrew word "ge-hinnom." It denotes the Valley of Hinnom, which slopes down to the south of the city of Jerusalem

145. The trivializing and rejection of eternal torment is expressed in various forms: 1. universalism and universal reconciliation: all people will be saved in the end 2. conditionalism or conditional immortality: the unredeemed will be annihilated – also called "annihilationism" 3. the possibility of repentance and salvation after death (hypothetical conditionalism). Each of these teachings must be rejected as unbiblical and as a hollowing out of the faith.

(Joshua 15:8; 18:16). In the history of Israel, under Kings Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6), this was the site of the most abominable idolatry. There children were sacrificed to the idol Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). They were burned to the beating of drums in order to drown out their cries. God announced a terrible judgment for these abominations (Jeremiah 7:32; 19:5-9; 32:35).

During the revival under King Josiah, this site was destroyed and turned into a heap of ruins (2 Kings 23:10). Later this place became a dump for rubble and refuse. The waste and filth of the city of Jerusalem were brought there. The corpses of executed criminals were also brought there to be burned. It was a garbage dump on which fire burned constantly to dispose of the waste. The worms found enough food in the refuse to be able to live there. That is why, in connection with hell, there is often mention of the worm that does not die and the fire that is not quenched (Mark 9:43-48; Isaiah 30:33; 66:24).

In the writings of the Jews, what happened at this place is compared with the end-time and eternal punitive judgment of the unrighteous.¹⁴⁶ The Lord Jesus Christ takes up the Jewish idea of those days here. In contrast to the idea of the Jews, His words are a revelation of divine truth. He emphasizes two things in particular:

- The whole person is handed over to the judgment of hell: “but rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28; cf. Luke 12:5). The judgment of hell (Matthew 5:29-30) will strike the soul just as much as the body (Luke 12:47).
- Hell is inseparably connected with fire: “and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:22). “It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43-44; cf. Matthew 5:29).

Man fears fire. In hell, judgment strikes the body, the soul, and the spirit. The image of fire speaks of torment and anguish. We cannot imagine it. The image is impressive enough. It is a warning that could not be more urgent. Fire is often used as an expression for God’s judgment, which on the day of judgment

146. Strack / Billerbeck, *Eckkurs: Scheol, Gehinnom u. Garten Eden*, München (Verlag C.H. Beck) pp. 1029-1037.
G.W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1985, p. 113.

is directed against everything that is not in agreement with God (Genesis 19:24; Leviticus 10:2; Numbers 16:35; 1 Corinthians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Hebrews 10:27; 2 Peter 3:7; Revelation 20:9; 21:8).

Further verses that do not mention the term “hell” but describe the same judgment are:

“It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8).

“... and they will throw them [the sons of the evil one] into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42; cf. 8:12).

Jude says: “undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

6.2.2 The Lake of Fire

In agreement with the verses above, the lake of fire is another designation for hell (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15). Only a few details are mentioned about this place. It is the place where the sinner will never come to rest in all eternity. The lake, like the sea, suggests perpetual restlessness (Revelation 14:11).

First the beast and the false prophet (two people of the end times, see Revelation 13) are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20). They go alive, in their bodies, to this place that burns with fire and sulfur. A thousand years later the devil is thrown into the lake of fire, to be tormented day and night forever and ever (20:10).

The lake of fire, the eternal fire, was prepared for the devil and his angels – not for man! (Matthew 25:41). But because man followed the devil, took the same path of disobedience, and would not submit to God, he too will meet his eternal destiny there (Revelation 20:10, 14, 15; 14:10).

Fire exists to burn and dispose of something, as also happened with the garbage in the Valley of Hinnom. In the judgment of hell, however, it is not a matter of burning in the sense of annihilation.

Besides the teaching of the complete annihilation of man, there is also the view of a temporary stay in hell. This serves to work off a limited measure of punishment or even serves purification in the sense of purgatory. If the image of fire were interpreted in this sense, all the ungodly would burn up instantly and at once when exposed to this fire. They have neither new life nor anything good that could remain after a purification. There is no escape from hell; it has only an entrance, but no exit.

The fire, as it burned in the Valley of Hinnom, is an image of the reality of hell in that it describes the torments of the sinner.

6.2.3 The Second Death

We have already established that death is not the end of man's existence but fundamentally a change in the form of existence. Moreover, death always brings about a separation. The second, and thus last, death (Revelation 20:6, 14) is the final separation of the sinner from God. Therein consists the sinner's eternal judgment. That is why Paul calls this judgment "eternal destruction, *away from the presence of the Lord*" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Because God cannot look upon sin, He must banish the sinner from His presence forever (Matthew 7:23; 25:12), since light and darkness can have no fellowship with each other (2 Corinthians 6:14). The sinner is banished into the outer darkness. He then knows that God cannot accept him with his sin (Matthew 22:13; Luke 13:22-28; 2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13). Many people want nothing to do with God – then they will also be without God forever. This fact makes us shudder in view of what will be the portion of sinners forever and without end.

The final turning away and absence of God means being in the outermost darkness of death – a never-ending lostness.

Question for Further Study

- In what images does the New Testament describe the eternal destiny of unbelievers?

6.3 How Long Does the Punishment Last?

This is an important question, much discussed through the centuries of church history up to the present day. Here the views of many Christians diverge. Some claim that the punishment is limited in time. When a person has served his measure of punishment, they say, he will be annihilated forever or enter heaven. Others, including the author, are convinced on the basis of the Word of God that the punishment will never end.

The question cannot be answered objectively if human ideas (and wishful thinking) and feelings are given a say. Holy Scripture must be the only authority. The statements of the Bible make it unmistakably clear that the punishment and torment of the ungodly will be eternal, that is, unlimited in time. This becomes clear from the following passages of Scripture:

“It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43; cf. Matthew 3:12; Isaiah 66:24; Jeremiah 17:4).

“It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8).

“Undergoing a punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

“He also will drink the wine of God’s fury, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night ...” (Revelation 14:10-11; cf. 20:10).

The fire burns eternally, that is, it is unquenchable. The duration of eternity, which human beings cannot imagine (“forever and ever”), is compared here – to make it easier for us to picture – with the endless, unceasing succession of day and night.

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). “The teaching of ... eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2). “Eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). “For whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 13; cf. 2 Peter 2:17). “But the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).

“But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, *forever*, but is guilty of an *eternal sin*” (Mark 3:29; Matthew 6:15; 12:32). Where there will be no forgiveness of sin for all eternity, there will also be God’s judgment on sin forever. Quite apart from the question of which people are in view here who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, this verse too makes clear that in eternity there will be people who have no forgiveness of sin and on whom the wrath of God will remain forever.

It is objected, however, that the words “eternal” and “eternity” do not always describe an infinite period of time but can also describe a finite one. We must therefore examine what these words mean in the New Testament with reference to judgment.

6.3.1 “Eternity” and “Eternal” in the New Testament

The word “eternity” corresponds to the Greek *aion*. This word can have the meaning of a particular period of time or a limited age: see Matthew 12:32;

24:3; 28:20; Luke 16:8; 20:34; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Galatians 1:4; 1 Timothy 6:17; 2 Timothy 4:10; Titus 2:12; Hebrews 9:26.

These verses make clear that it is not only a matter of time as such but of the moral characteristics by which the age or the course of time is marked.

“Eternity” is also – in most places – an infinite period of time:

- “Forever” (Greek: *eis ton aiona*). This expression occurs in the following verses: Matthew 21:19; Mark 3:29; 11:14; Luke 1:55; John 4:14; 6:51, 58; 8:35, 51, 52; 10:28; 11:26; 12:34; 13:8; 14:16; 1 Corinthians 8:13; 2 Corinthians 9:9; Hebrews 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 1 Peter 1:25; 1 John 2:17; 2 John 2.
- “Into the ages” (*eis tous aionas*). See the following passages: Luke 1:33; Romans 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; 2 Corinthians 11:31; Hebrews 13:8.
- “To all the ages” (*eis pantas tous aionas*): Jude 25
- “Into the age of the age” (*eis ton aiona tou aionos*): Hebrews 1:8.
- “Into the ages of the ages” (*eis tous aionas ton aionon*). This expression occurs often: Romans 16:27; Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; 2 Timothy 4:18; Hebrews 13:21; 1 Peter 4:11; 5:11; Revelation 1:6, 18; 4:9, 10; 5:13; 7:12; 10:6; 11:15; 14:11; 15:7; 19:3; 20:10; 22:5.

In Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 we find an expression for the endlessness of the punishment that cannot be intensified any further – the punishment that will strike the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, but also the people who followed the beast. They will be tormented “forever and ever.” In Greek, eternity stands in the plural. Literally, then, it says: “into the ages of the ages.”

The adjective “eternal” also points to unlimited duration. This can be seen clearly in the “eternal” blessings of believers. Believers possess:

- “eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9)
- “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12)
- the “eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15)
- “eternal glory” (2 Timothy 2:10; 1 Peter 5:10)
- the house “eternal in the heavens” (2 Corinthians 5:1)
- the “eternal kingdom” (2 Peter 1:11).

No child of God thinks that these things are limited in time. Indeed, they stand in direct contrast to the temporal and transient things (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

In contrast to the blessings of believers stands the lot of unbelievers:

- “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46)
- “eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8; 25:41; Jude 7)
- “eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2)
- “eternal destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Both the blessings of believers and the punishment of the ungodly are equally eternal, that is, without end, as Matthew sums it up briefly and concisely: “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).

A further argument against eternal torment is that the adjective “eternal” supposedly does not refer to the existence of the sinner and the duration of his judgment but is to be restricted to the effect, or aftereffect, of the judgment. The second, eternal death is then the annihilation of the ungodly. But can one speak of the *annihilation* of man at all? Does “destruction” mean the termination of human existence?

6.3.2 “Destruction”

If the expression “destruction” is understood as annihilation, that is, as the end of human existence, then the punishment of hell would not be infinite but finite. This view, however, contradicts the passages of Scripture already quoted. If man really is annihilated, how then can the smoke of his torment and anguish rise forever and ever (Revelation 14:11; 20:10)? What is the punishment of eternal fire for, if there is no longer anyone for whom this fire “burns” (Jude 7)? Why is the fire of judgment unquenchable (Mark 9:43)?

These words of Scripture make clear that *destruction* cannot have the meaning of *annihilation*. Other passages in the New Testament make this clear as well. The Greek New Testament has several words for destruction, of which I list here the most important, which are also used for the judgment of the ungodly in eternity.

Noun “destruction” (apoleia)

This word occurs 19 times and is translated in various ways:

- “waste” or “squandering” (Matthew 26:8; Mark 14:4)
- “to give up” (Acts 25:16)
- “son of destruction” (John 17:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:3)

- “destruction” (Matthew 7:13; Romans 9:22; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 1 Timothy 6:9; Hebrews 10:39; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:7; 3:16; Revelation 17:8, 11)

Verb “destroy” (apolymai)

The same applies to the verb “destroy” (86 occurrences in the New Testament):

- the “perishing” of the earth in the flood (2 Peter 3:6; cf. Hebrews 1:11)
- “to perish, pass away” (1 Peter 1:8 among others)
- “to kill” (Matthew 2:13; 12:24; 21:41; 27:26 among others)
- “to perish” (Matthew 5:29, 30; 8:26; 26:52; Jude 11 among others)
- “lost” with reference to people, animals, and things (Matthew 10:6; 15:24; 16:25; 18:11, 14; 2 Corinthians 2:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 John 8 among others)
- to “destroy” body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28)
- the “ruining” of wineskins (Matthew 9:17)
- “to destroy, wipe out” (Jude 5)

Noun “destruction” (olethros)

This word occurs four times in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 6:9.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 we have an impressive description of the Lord’s judgment at His appearing, but at the same time also of eternal judgment: “and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, from [or: away from] the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

6.3.3 Summary

Like *eternal life*, these terms too have various meanings. In a few places they can mean the destruction of a thing or the removal of people from the earth. But *destruction* never means the annihilation or extinction of man. It can mean the loss of earthly life. That, however, is not the end of existence but only the transition into another form of existence.

Destruction is moral downfall and ruin, which is not annihilation but the radical deterioration of a condition. Destruction is never the loss of existence

but the loss of everything that gives existence its value. If in these verses one substitutes the word “annihilate” or “annihilation” for “destruction,” not only is the meaning distorted – the verses also become completely unintelligible.

The eternal destruction of the ungodly consists in this: that they will be cut off from God forever and exposed to judgment. They are lost and find themselves in the outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Jude 13).

Questions for Further Study

- How can one counter the false views that ...
- unbelievers, or their souls, will be annihilated?
- their punishment is limited in time?

6.3.4 The Righteousness and Holiness of God

For human understanding and feeling, it is hard to imagine that there is an eternal judgment and an unceasing punishment of the sinner. But often only the end is seen, without considering how it came to that. Our own notions must not guide us. Precisely in this ultimate question, people are inclined to give their own thoughts priority over the Word of God. But the Word of God is the only standard, to which we can only humbly submit in all questions.

Let us remind ourselves once again that God takes no pleasure in condemning the sinner: “For he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3:33). But why, then, is there an eternal judgment? The answer is: because God is not only love but also light: He is a God of absolute righteousness and holiness. God’s righteousness demands the payment of the debt of sin, the punishment of the sinner. God’s holiness cannot tolerate sin and must remove and consume everything connected with it (Joshua 24:19).

The prophet Isaiah says: “But the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness” (Isaiah 5:16).

If one denies eternal judgment, one thereby calls into question the very nature of God. God is unchangeable in His nature and never gives up His righteousness and holiness. Besides the unchangeableness of God, one also underestimates the nature and the gravity of sin. Sin is the reason for eternal judgment. And what is sin in God’s eyes? Sin is neither weakness nor a trivial offense; “sin is *lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4). Lawlessness is not only the

transgression of a commandment but the rejection of all divine law, that is, self-will and the denial of God's authority. Ultimately that is anarchy, the disregard of the Creator's claim on His creatures. Sin is enmity and rebellion against God.

Sin does not necessarily express itself in open hostility toward God but makes itself felt in many forms. Through sin the majesty and honor of God are offended. God will therefore not leave sin unpunished. He will restore His honor and fulfill the demands of His holiness. Children of God have to do with the same God, but the Son of God fulfilled God's demands on them on the cross.

Our feelings as children of God, too, are unfortunately influenced and clouded by sin. We ourselves were sinners by nature. That is why we are not neutral in our judgment¹⁴⁷ and cannot adjust God's wrath against sin to our own standard. What idea do we have of how God feels about sin? Do we want to prescribe to Him that He may not punish the sinner eternally for his sin? How He deals with the sinner is God's business alone. He never needs a justification for what He does, and yet He explains these things to us in His Word.

Eternal judgment does not call God's love into question. He has done everything and proved that heaven and eternal glory are open to every person. The holy and righteous God¹⁴⁸ is therefore not unjust when He condemns the sinner forever. God will be glorified in this too. God is majestic in holiness (Exodus 15:11)!

The apostle Paul says: 'Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, 'That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.' But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?' (Romans 3:4-5).

6.3.5 The Cross of Golgotha

Now that we have come to the end of this book, let us, under the impression of the terrible judgment that awaits the sinner, take a look at the most important hours in the history of mankind.

We have established that God never gives up His righteousness and holiness in favor of His love and grace. The cross of Golgotha provides us with the

147. It is the constant endeavor of the Holy Spirit that we understand what sin is, so that we hate it and feel about it as God feels about it (cf. 1 John 1:5–2:2).

148. Revelation 16:5; Psalm 47:8; 119:137; Isaiah 6:3.

most impressive proof of this. The cross reminds us of the holiness and righteousness of God, which made no exception even for the Son of God when He gave Himself for our sins: a divinely perfect work, accomplished by a divine Person, to deliver us from an infinite judgment.

The Son of God, who is without sin, bore the judgment in our place. With our sin He met the holy God, who punished Him for it on the cross. He bore our sins in His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:24), He was made sin in our place (2 Corinthians 5:21), He became a curse for us on the tree (Galatians 3:13).

Marc Tapernoux puts it aptly: "This happened so that sin might be atoned for and the claims of the righteousness, holiness, and glory of God might be satisfied, and so that God, on the other hand, might pardon sinners. The greatness of this sacrifice [Hebrews 10:1-18], the infinite worth of Him [Matthew 3:17; 17:5] who atoned for the guilt [1 John 2:2; 4:10], the severity of the judgment that struck Him [Matthew 27:46; Psalms 22; 42; 69], make us understand the gravity of the sin that had to be atoned for and the extent of the destruction into which it has plunged man: it is an eternal destruction."¹⁴⁹

Whoever says that the punishment is limited in time is thereby claiming that sin is not serious enough in God's eyes to require an eternal punishment. But if sin is so harmless, why did God judge His own Son in such a terrible way on the cross? Why did He forsake Him there in the three hours of darkness? Why did He strike Him so dreadfully (Isaiah 53; Zechariah 13:7)?

Was this horrifying work necessary if we only needed to be delivered from a certain amount of temporal suffering? Certainly not. He did not deliver us from an amount of suffering limited in time but from the holy wrath of God, which was so terrible that not even God's own Son was spared from it (Romans 5:8-10; 8:32).

If one claims that the lost sinner will not be punished eternally but will one day be annihilated, then one disregards the sufferings of the Son of God! That is the grievous consequence that inevitably follows from this view. If it were only a matter of delivering us from a temporary torment, it would not have been necessary for the Son of God to come to us and sacrifice Himself for us. But because the wrath of God and the judgment are eternal, only a divine Person could bear them in our place and deliver us from them.

149. Marc Tapernoux, *Das ewige Gericht*, Zürich (Beröa-Verlag), 1962, p. 5.

If one denies eternal torment, the consequences are so far-reaching that one even touches and belittles the work of redemption of Jesus Christ. God keep us from diminishing in any way the infinitely great value of the divinely great sacrifice! Let us hold fast to this: there the Son of God took upon Himself, in its full extent, the punishment that would have struck us eternally.

That is the greatest proof of God's infinite love and at the same time of God's unchangeable holiness.

It is the everlasting mercy
that far surpasses every thought;
the mercy of the One whose arms of love
bend down to where the sinner is;
who frees us from the curse and death
and leads us into Jesus' glory.

We were not meant to be lost forever;
God wills that help should come to us;
that is why the Son came down to earth
and afterward ascended into heaven.
So now from the throne of grace there comes
the fullness of grace through the Son.

O grace, which now can blot out
all our sins through Christ's blood,
and has proclaimed in every place
forgiveness and peace to everyone.
Eternal salvation is now ready –
O wonderful time of grace!

7 Appendix

7.1 What Does Holy Scripture Teach about Sheol and Hades?

Answer to a reader's question in the Bible Treasury, vol. N 9, p. 79

Questions

Does the expression “so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40) denote more than the grave, and does the expression “he descended into the lower parts of the earth” (Ephesians 4:9) denote more than death and the grave?

Is it in agreement with Scripture to say that Sheol or Hades (including Abraham's bosom and paradise) is under the earth, and that the Lord Jesus descended there and took some up with Him on high? Or was paradise, or Abraham's bosom, always in heaven and never under the earth, not even in Old Testament times?

What does the expression “to go down to Sheol” mean?

Is the “abyss” something other than “Hades”?

Can the words Sheol or Hades be applied to heaven, which is, after all, part of the unseen world?

J.C.B.

Answer

The Old Testament expression “Sheol” occurs 65 times and is translated in the Authorized Version 31 times as “grave,” 3 times as “pit,” and 31 times as “hell.” This shows that the word can have various meanings. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), the same word is translated 31 times as “Hades,” twice as “death” (thanatos) (2 Samuel 22:6; Proverbs 23:14), and in two places (Job 24:19; Ezekiel 32:21) not translated at all, because the Greek language has no word that could render the meaning in these places.

In the following passages – to name only a few – Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Numbers 16:30-31; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Psalm 49:15; 141:7, “Sheol” means merely “grave” and has been translated that way in the English version as well, except for Numbers 16, where “pit” is used; in all other places the expression “Sheol” denotes the place of departed spirits. The grave receives the lifeless

body. In summary we can say that the Old Testament expression “Sheol” is used both for the grave and for the abode of departed spirits.

When we now turn to the New Testament, this double meaning disappears, for life and incorruptibility have been brought to light through the gospel. The word “Hades,” which is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Sheol,” refers in the New Testament only to the world of departed spirits, just as the words “death” and “grave” (Revelation 20) refer only to the body and not to the soul and spirit. It is the body that dies, while the spirit returns to God who gave it. The spirit and the soul never cease to exist. Hades receives only the unbelieving dead. When the believer is called home, he does not go to Hades but to paradise.

Some think that Hades receives believers and unbelievers alike at death and that these two classes are nevertheless separated by a great chasm. Scripture nowhere says that believers go to Hades, but rather that they are far away from it (Luke 16:23). If verse 10 of Psalm 16, a verse quoted twice in Acts 2, were a basis for the teaching that the Lord after His death went down to Sheol or Hades and that His soul was not left there – yet we know that He went to paradise, a garden of delight and not of darkness, where the thief on the cross was also – then there would have to be two parts there, for believers and unbelievers. But this error arose from a wrong translation of this verse in the English version. This verse says: “You will not abandon my soul to [not: in] Sheol (hand it over to or consign it there).” This correct translation is confirmed by the “corrected text” of Acts 2:27, 31, accepted by Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Westcott, Hort, and other translators.

The word “Hades” is never used in a positive sense in the New Testament. If there were both a region for believers and one for unbelievers in Hades, why do we read of Hades without exception in connection with unbelievers and find not a single indication that a believer is staying there?

The expressions “in the heart” or “the lower parts of the earth” mean the grave. Our Lord not only died but was also buried and raised on the third day. Jonah is a type of this. Psalm 139:15 can keep us from too literal an interpretation of the words. Without doubt the lower parts of the earth here mean something unseen or hidden. The tomb was secured with a guard after it had been sealed with a stone (Matthew 27:66). No human eye could look into the holy place where the body of Jesus lay.

Before Christ came, the expression “in Abraham’s bosom” was for the devout Jew the epitome of bliss, because he knew that Abraham was called “the friend of God.” To be with Christ is the blessed prospect of a Christian. That is above, in the paradise of God. Paradise is not synonymous with Hades. Abraham was not in Hades; rather, the tormented soul that was in Hades saw him “far off.” It is a human invention that the Lord was in Hades and set anyone free from it. The Lord did not go into Hades but into paradise. Scripture gives not a single indication of a deliverance from Hades. The passages Judges 5:12; Psalm 68:18; Ephesians 4:8 do not speak of the release of captives but of the capture of evil powers, which are here called the captivity. Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them (Colossians 2:15). He led captivity captive. This does not refer to the release of captives from hell, as some interpret it.

“Going down to Sheol” refers to the grave or the pit. Both are under the earth.

The abyss (Revelation 20) is a place to which no human being comes, but where Satan will be bound for a thousand years before he is finally thrown into the lake of fire for all eternity. Hades, on the other hand, receives the soul and spirit of those who died unreconciled to God, that is, of the unbelieving dead, whose spirit once dwelt in the mortal body. Soul and spirit go to Hades, while the body, which is formed from dust, finds a place in the grave (in the sea or on land) and waits for the resurrection to judgment. When the person is raised – heaven and earth will then no longer exist – he will not be thrown into Hades (which will then no longer exist) but into the lake of fire, which was prepared not for human beings but for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). The believer who has fallen asleep is raised not for judgment but for glory (Philippians 3:20-21).

The words “Sheol” or “Hades” cannot be applied to heaven, since they stand in contrast to it.

Translator’s Note

The word Hades occurs in the following places in the New Testament:

Matthew 11:23 (Luke 10:15): In these two passages Hades stands in clear contrast to heaven. The Lord speaks of Capernaum being brought down to Hades. The negative meaning is obvious.

Matthew 16:18: Here the Lord says that whoever has become a living stone in the house of God through the new birth and faith cannot be overcome by the gates of Hades, that is, will never come into Hades. This passage is likewise clearly negative, in that the Lord says what cannot happen.

Luke 16:23: The rich man lifts up his eyes in Hades and is in torment there. It is not said that Lazarus was also in Hades. On the contrary, the rich man sees Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. Abraham's bosom, or paradise, is not part of Hades; rather, the two are clearly distinct places, and it is impossible to get from the one place to the other. "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed."

Acts 2:27, 31: The translation of the quotation from Psalm 16:10 in Acts 2:27, 31 is, in my opinion, not correct. The Septuagint literally reads *enkataleiphes eis haden* ("leave into Hades"). The basic form of the verb is *enkataleipo*, which elsewhere is better translated "abandon" (or: "forsake"). Apart from Acts 2:27, 31, this word *enkataleipo* occurs 8 more times in the New Testament and is translated 6 times as "forsake" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34; 2 Corinthians 4:9; 2 Timothy 4:10, 16; Hebrews 13:5), once as "leave" (Romans 9:29), and once as "neglect" or "give up" (Hebrews 10:25). The decisive point is that the text here does not read *en haden* (dative, as in Luke 16:23) but *eis haden* ("into Hades," accusative). The preposition *eis* ("into") occurs only with the accusative. In Greek, as in German, the accusative indicates movement or direction. If the original text read *en haden*, *enkataleiphes* could be translated "leave behind." The expression *eis haden* rules out this possibility. This is not a question of different readings but clearly a question of translation¹⁵⁰ (cf. the detailed remarks by W.

150. This view does, however, differ from that of J.N. Darby, who translated these passages differently (cf. the preface to the Elberfelder translation on Hades and hell, which comes from J.N. Darby, *Coll. Writings*, vol. 13).

Kelly in his books *An Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* and *The Preaching to the Spirits in Prison*.¹⁵¹

The preposition *eis* occurs, among other places, in Matthew 18:20: “gathered in (literally: to) my name”; then in connection with baptism, e.g., Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 10:2, etc. (cf. the preface to the Elberfelder translation [German Bible translation] regarding baptism).

Peter quotes Psalm 16:10 in Acts 2 precisely in order to prove that God raised the One who had been nailed to the cross and killed by the hands of lawless men. It was not possible for the Lord to remain in death and be held by it. With this quotation in verses 25-27, Peter means to say that the Lord was never in Hades. God could not allow the soul of the Lord to be in Hades during the time His body lay in the tomb. Just as His body did not see corruption, so His soul was not consigned to Hades. The lawless would have done that if it had been in their power. But God thought otherwise about it, because the Lord Jesus had God’s full pleasure. God then proved this most clearly by raising the Lord. Is there any passage that makes the negative character of Hades clearer?

Revelation 1:18: Here we see that the Lord has the keys of Death and Hades. In this verse the Lord is presented to us as the Judge, as we also see Him in Revelation 20:11-15, where He judges all the dead. There Death and Hades must give back all the dead so that they may be judged. Satan does not give back the dead voluntarily. But the Lord has the final power over Death and Hades as well.

151. W. Kelly, *The Preaching to the Spirits in Prison, 1 Peter III. 18-20*, Sunbury (Belivers Bookshelf), pp. 133, 134: “The Hebrew word in Psalm 16:10 does not mean ‘in’ but ‘to’ Sheol; it implies no descent, any more than Acts 2:27 does in the critical text (*eis haden*) of Alford, Lachmann, Tischendorf, Tregelles, Wordsworth, Westcott, and Hort. So the Revised Version rightly translates the Hebrew: ‘You will not leave my soul to Sheol [abandon it to Sheol],’ etc., although it wrongly translates the Greek as ‘in’ instead of ‘to.’ When our Lord died, He commended His spirit into the hands of His Father, who is certainly in heaven; and the converted robber, late as it was, was with Him in paradise that very day (Luke 23). Now we have already seen that, instead of being in Hades, paradise is in heaven, and, as has been said, its most glorious part. One apostle connects it with the ‘third heaven’ (2 Corinthians 12:3-4); and our Lord says through another that He will give the one who overcomes (at the glorification) to eat of the tree of life – certainly not in Hades (Revelation 2:7). In the Old Testament, Hades, like death, life, and incorruptibility, remained undefined; but these things and far more have been brought to light through the gospel. Therefore in the last parable of Luke 16 our Lord describes the rich man, who had neither faith nor love, as lifting up his eyes in Hades after death – but the believing Lazarus as blessed with faithful Abraham. So great a chasm was fixed as to rule out any crossing from either side. Hades was indeed ‘far off’; and to be there means to be ‘in torment.’ Not a word is said about Lazarus being there; he was in Abraham’s bosom.”

Revelation 6:8: Hades follows the pale horse on which Death sits. This passage is connected with the judgments that will strike the earth after the Rapture. Those whom Death kills, Hades receives at once – of course only the soul and spirit of the dead. The faithful Jews who perish during this time, by contrast, are under the altar (6:9).

Revelation 20:13-14: Here Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. Death and Hades are the last things that stand in opposition to God and are therefore thrown into the lake of fire. Would God consign the spirit and soul of a believer, who is already saved, to a place that stands in opposition to Him? That is impossible! Death, too, stands in opposition to God, but for the believer it is the door into the unseen. If the Lord does not come first, we too must still pass through death, because the body of sin has not yet been redeemed. But our hope is that the Lord is coming, and coming soon, and “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:21).

Werner Mücher

7.2 Table of the Various Terms

Term	Bible references	Meaning
Sheol (Hebrew)	65 times in the Old Testament; e.g., Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Numbers 16:30-33; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Psalm 49:15; 141:7, etc.	First of all the grave, the tomb in the earth. But then also the realm of the dead, without distinguishing the abode of believing or unbelieving people
Hades (Greek)	Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14	Abode of the unbelieving dead. Place of torment. In the New Testament, Hades always has a negative meaning
Paradise	Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7	Place of believers who have fallen asleep, in conscious joy
Abraham's bosom	Luke 16:22-23	Another name for paradise

Lake of fire – the lake that burns with fire and sulfur	Revelation 19:20; 20:14- 15; 21:8 (cf. “eternal punishment” Matthew 25:46)	Abode of the people, of Satan, and of his demons, who will unceasingly experience the torments of judgment for all eternity. To this day no one is in the lake of fire. The first to be banished there are the beast and the false prophet, Satan only 1,000 years later; and with him then all unbelievers.
Hell (Greek: gehenna)	Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6	Another name for the lake of fire
Abyss (Hebrew: abaddon)	Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Psalm 88:11; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20; Luke 8:31; Romans 10:7; 2 Peter 2:4; Revelation 9:1, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3	The abyss is, among other things, the place where fallen angels are kept whom God has bound until the final judgment.
Heaven	more than 700 times in the	The Bible distinguishes between the first heaven (= the atmospheric universe, interstellar space), and the second heaven (the throne of God and paradise are (2 Corinthians 12)
Father's house	John	The uncreated heaven, in which the three Persons of the Godhead have dwelt from all eternity and into which all believers of the assembly (church) of God will enter

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