

THE ULTIMATE CHOICE

Just before Israel entered the Promised Land, God said: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and curse. So choose life in order that you may live" (Deut. 30:19). In the New Testament Jesus said the same thing in these words: "...unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Like 13:3). The best known and best loved passage in the scriptures states: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). As familiar and well-loved this passage is there are few Christians that actually believe it. They only believe part of it, the part that promises eternal life. Very few believe the other part "shall not perish," substituting the idea "they shall not spend eternity burning in hell." And substituting "going to heaven" for "eternal life." The ultimate choice is not "going to heaven" or "going to hell" when we die, rather the choice is between life or death, the same choice God gave to Israel in the wilderness. To further confuse and complicate this statement most church people believe that death is not death, but a continued existence in another life, believing the lie first proposed to Eve by Satan in the garden "dying, you shall not die."

Satan's message was "You surely will not die...you will be like God." God, not man, is immortal: "...whom (God) no man has seen or can see, who alone possesses immortality" (I Tim. 6:16); "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God..." (I Tim.1:17). It is only in resurrection that mortal man attains immortality: "This perishable shall put on imperishable, and this mortal will put on immortality... (I Cor. 15: 54). Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep" (I Cor. 15:20) and therefore is the only man of whom it can be said is immortal. However he is "the first fruits" of them that sleep. This means there will be others to become immortal at the resurrection because they "chose life."

R. L. Whitelaw in his book *The Blessed Hope: What Makes it Blessed?* states: "Nowhere does the Bible teach that man has a soul added to and temporarily held in a body, but bound to live on somewhere forever. That is a fiction of Greek mythology, itself born of the first and deadly lie Satan implanted in Eve's mind, 'You shall not surely die!' Nowhere does the Bible teach that man has two separate parts, and that he can continue in self-conscious life without the other; nowhere does the Bible confuse 'spirit' and 'soul' which is the whole man as a living, sentient being." In the *Jewish Encyclopedia's* article "Immortality of the Soul" we read: "The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is nowhere taught in Holy Scripture. This belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principle exponent."

The prevalent teaching that "man has an immortal soul" that will never die and what we recognize as death is nor really death, but

only death of the body, the soul continuing to live either in heaven or hell, is not found in Scripture. Luke 16:19-31 is the passage generally used to prove at death the destiny is either hell (hades) or heaven (Abraham's bosom, a prelude to heaven for those dying before Christ). To understand this passage we must include the context, something traditionalists conveniently ignore, interpreting this passage as if the story had no context at all, as if its primary point is one found nowhere in the context. Norval Geldenhuys in his commentary on *The Gospel of Luke* states: "Jesus related this parable not in order to satisfy our curiosity about life after death, but to emphasize vividly the tremendous seriousness of life on this side of the grave. This therefore is a parable not...a real occurrence from which various questions in connection with the hereafter may be answered." Jesus has spoken of covetousness and stewardship (16:1-13). When the Pharisees scoff at Jesus' teaching (ver. 14) he warns them against self-justification, reminding them that God knows their hearts and that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God (ver. 15). This passage is usually said to prove the immortality of the soul. Some go to Hades and some to Paradise. Therefore it is not accepted as a parable because Jesus does not say it is a parable. However, Jesus never said that all parables he spoke were "parables." For example in Matthew 15:13, 14 Jesus teaches about the blindness of the Pharisees and says nothing about it being a parable, but in verse 15 Peter said "Explain the *parable* to us." In Mark 7 Jesus teaches about the tradition of the Elders and does not mention that his teaching is a parable, yet in verse 7, "His disciples question him about the *parable*." In Luke 12:35-40 Jesus teaches about slaves being ready for the return of a master. He does not say it is a parable, but in verse 41 Peter asks, "Lord are you addressing this *parable* to us or everyone else as well?" Mark 4:34 states that "He was not speaking to them without parables but he was explaining everything privately to his own disciples."

The moral of the story is stated in Luke 16:31: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." It was unbelieving Israel, especially the Pharisees and the leaders, that did not listen to Moses and the Prophets. They are represented by the rich man because Israel was the most favored people on earth (Rom. 9:3-5). Lazarus, on the other hand, represents the Gentiles who were without hope until the `gospel was revealed (Eph. 2:11, 12). The "crumbs from the rich man's table and the dogs" is descriptive of how the Jews thought of the Gentiles (Matt. 15:21-28). Abraham's bosom shows that the Gentiles became children of Abraham and heirs of the promise, which the Jews claimed as being exclusively theirs (Gal. 3:26-29). When the rich man died and lifted up his eyes in hades represents the fact that he died having no relation to Abraham, thus the unbelieving Jews were cut off from the covenant (Matt. 21:43); while the Gentiles were given salvation (Rom. 11:11-15). The gulf between them is the division made by acceptance or rejection of Christ, To this day the Jews are in torment, weeping at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, weeping over the loss of their once exalted position.

Nothing in the context remotely suggests the final state of the wicked. The context is the wrong thinking of the Jews.

If this teaching of Jesus is about eternal punishment then; the punishment becomes punishment that never ends, rather than punishment that is eternal in its result (death). When “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life man *became a living soul*” (Gen. 2:7). Man does not *have* a soul he *is* a soul. So the Scripture refers to men as “souls” over 150 times in the Old Testament and 16 times in the New. Edward W. Fudge in his book *The Fire That Consumes* states: “Paul uses ‘soul’ only 13 times, usually with reference to the natural life of man. The adjective form of this word designates the unspiritual or carnal man as opposed to the spiritual man (I Cor. 2; 14ff), or the natural body of the present life in contrast to the spiritual body of the life to come (I Cor. 15:44).” In II Corinthians 4:16 Paul speaks of our “outer man” and “inner man” and states that our outer man is decaying and our inner man is being renewed day by day.” He also prays that the Ephesians “be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man...” (Eph. 3:16). The outer man then is the soul and body and the inner man is the spirit. Man, then, is not a “dual nature” that is soul and body, but “spirit, soul and body” (I Thess. 5:23). It is the spirit that gives life to the body, thus “the body without the spirit is dead” (James 2:26). Ecclesiastes 12: 7 states “the dust (body Gen.3:19) will return to earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” When Stephen was stoned to death his final statement was “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”...and “he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59, 60) and Jesus’ last words from the cross were “Father into Your hands I commit my spirit.” And having said this, he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). “It is the spirit that gives life” (John 6:63). That which made Adam alive is the fact that “God breathed into his nostrils the breath (spirit) of life and man became a living soul” (Gen.2:7). When the breath of life (spirit) leaves the body man is no longer a “living soul.” The soul as well as the body is dead. This contradicts the popular (and sacred) belief that the soul is immortal and will never die. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus tells his Apostles: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell;” Luke’s account is a good commentary on the truth Jesus is emphasizing: “Luke 12:4, 5: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more they can do....fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast in hell...” If nothing else these verses shows that the soul is not immortal, because it can be destroyed. Ezekiel 18:4 proves the soul does die. “The soul who sins will die” (NASV). At death it is the soul and body that dies. The breath of life (spirit) returns to God, and will be restored to man when he is resurrected. Immortality is given at the resurrection.

The soul is not immortal and the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) not burning forever in Hell. If the wages of sin is eternal punishment, then Christ would have had to have been punished eternally in order to pay the wages of sin. Since death is the wages of sin then when he died the wages of sin against the sinner were paid in full. Destiny in eternity is not a question of heaven or hell, but a question of life or death. At the resurrection the Christian is given immortality and the sinner perishes. The unrepentant will be punished, but this period of conscious punishment will be temporary then they will be destroyed and cease to exist.

On this subject, that is “perishing” as compared to “burning forever” Herold Guillebaud in *The Righteous Judge* has a statement on this subject, although rather long, is worth quoting: “Let none imagine that because eternal punishment does not mean everlasting torment, therefore it is a mild penalty which need not be dreaded. No more dreadful mistake could be made than so to consider the matter. Having faced death once in this world, the lost must face it again, under circumstances of unutterable shame and horror. God will be known for what He is, the One who fills heaven and earth. Then the almighty King, who had offered him salvation and would so gladly have saved him, will reject him and pronounce him only fit for destruction.

“The instinct, which so often makes even the suicide struggle desperately for life at the last, will surely be far more powerful as the soul faces the final disintegration of personality, the utter end, and what an awful end! How terrible the process of destruction will be will depend on the degree of each soul’s guilt before God...how much light has been disobeyed. But in any case what an awful thing it must be to be rejected by God as worthless, and cast upon the bonfire as rubbish to be destroyed, realizing as never before what might have been if God’s salvation had been accepted. Remember those words of the Lord Jesus Christ...’There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The crucial choice every man faces is either receive the wages of sin, death; or receive the free gift of God, eternal life (Rom. 6:23). Sin pays wages (you get what you deserve), but God gives a free gift (you are given what you do not deserve), and this is the crucial choice. This choice is expressed in many ways in the New Testament. To note a few, the choice is between: Life and destruction: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and way is narrow that leads to life and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13, 14). Repentance or perish: In comparing the Jews with the fate of the Galileans Jesus said, “I tell you unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:1-5). Eternal life or wrath and indignation (anger of God, Heb. 3:10, 17): God “who will render to each person according to his deeds: those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality; eternal life, but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth but obey, wrath and indignation” (Rom. 2:6-8). Death or eternal life: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our lord” (Rom. 6:23). Death or life and peace: “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6). To die or live: “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:13). Obeying the Gospel or eternal destruction: “The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven ...dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (II Thess. 1:9). Receiving the love of the truth or perishing: “...the lawless one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan...and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they received not the love of the truth so as to be saved” (II Thess. 2:9, 10).

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