



"Only the dead have seen the end of war."
—Plato

30-Apr-10

Death Is Not the End (Part Seven)

It is wonderful to know that human life is not without purpose or an end in itself. God's Word shows conclusively that there is life after death, that there is an age to come in which all those who have not been called to salvation will be raised to new life and hear what [God](#) offers to those who [repent](#) and accept [Jesus Christ](#) as their personal Savior. The [resurrection from the dead](#) provides [hope](#) for all humanity ([Acts 24:15](#); [1 Peter 1:3](#)).

But what happens when a person dies? Abel—as far as we know, the first human being to die—has been dead nearly six thousand years ([Genesis 4:8](#)). What has become of him? What about his "soul" or his "spirit"—where is it? What is he doing now? And for that matter, what has become of all those billions of people who have died between Abel and right now?

To begin with, however, we must acknowledge a foundational truth: that the human soul is *not* immortal. This is a false teaching that was implanted into human religion when [Satan](#) convinced Eve of it in the Garden of Eden: "Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" ([Genesis 3:4-5](#)). Essentially, the Devil tells her that God is a liar, she will not die, and in fact, eating of the Tree of Knowledge would make her like God, a goddess with the same abilities as the Creator Himself. Satan's deceptive assurance that she would not die—taking the sting out of God's command—was central to her decision to eat of the fruit.

Elsewhere, the Bible flatly asserts that humans are physical, mortal beings. First, of course, is God's own warning in [Genesis 2:17](#) that, upon eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, "you shall surely die"—in other words, [sin](#) ultimately ends in death, both the physical death of the human body and in due course the destruction of man's spiritual component in the judgment (see [Revelation 20:14-15](#); [John 5:29](#)). The apostle writes in [Hebrews 9:27](#), "It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Twice in Ezekiel 18, God declares that souls die: "The soul who sins shall die" ([Ezekiel 18:4, 20](#)), which the apostle Paul echoes in [Romans 6:23](#): "For the wages of sin is death." Finally, Jesus warns in [Matthew 10:28](#) that God can destroy *both* soul and body in Gehenna.

In fact, only God has true immortality. He is, Paul writes to Timothy, ". . . the blessed and only Potentate, the [King of kings](#) and Lord of lords, *who alone has immortality*" ([I Timothy 6:15-16](#)). Human beings can have immortality only through Christ and only through the resurrection from the dead, according to the pattern set by Jesus in His resurrection to eternal life ([I Corinthians 15:22](#), 45-52). So, while true Christians have eternal life in them through the indwelling of the [Holy Spirit](#), it is only an earnest, down payment, or guarantee of the fullness of eternal life that will be given at the resurrection (see [II Corinthians 5:1-5](#); [Ephesians 1:13-14](#)).

As we saw earlier in [Job 32:8](#), man has a spirit that provides him with understanding, and Paul explains in [I Corinthians 2:11](#) that it endows humanity with intellect. This spirit in man comes from God ([Zechariah 12:1](#)) and returns to Him when we die ([Ecclesiastes 12:7](#); [Acts 7:59](#)). It records the events of our lives, our characters, and our personalities, which God somehow stores until the resurrection, when it will be returned, restoring each person's full memory and characteristics. However, the Bible never describes this human spirit as immortal or eternal; in fact, [John 6:63](#) and [Romans 8:10-11](#) explains that man needs that other spirit, God's Holy Spirit, to achieve eternal life.

So, what happens when a person dies? Again, the early chapters of Genesis provide a fundamental answer: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" ([Genesis 3:19](#)). Humans, then, die and their bodies naturally decompose, breaking down into the elemental components of which they are made. The biblical usage of the Hebrew word *Sheol* and the Greek *Hades*—which some, following pagan thought, contend is a place where the spirits of the dead live on after death—actually means "the grave" or "the pit," describing the place of burial.

Every human that has died, with the exception of Jesus Christ, remains in his grave, whether it is in the earth or in the sea. Even David, righteous and beloved of God, awaits the resurrection in his grave. In [Acts 2:29](#), Peter says to the crowd on the day of

Pentecost, "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. . . ."

Scripture also explains that in death, life and consciousness are absent. Solomon writes in [Ecclesiastes 9:5](#), "The dead know nothing," and he later adds, "There is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verse 10). The psalmist writes in [Psalm 146:4](#) about a person's death, "His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish." Thus, while God retrieves our human spirit for safekeeping, it has no inherent life, self-awareness, or any kind of functionality. It requires a living body to work, so once the body dies, it is inanimate, a mere record of a life but without life in itself.

In addition, while it is a record of a person's life, it is not the person himself. The Bible declares that people do not [go to heaven](#) (or to [hell](#), for that matter) after death. In the same Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, Peter asserts, "For David did not ascend into the heavens" ([Acts 2:34](#)). Jesus Himself confirms this in [John 3:13](#): "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." These direct statements confirm that all the dead, rather than going to heaven or hell or some sort of purgatory, await the resurrection in the sleep of death. They all await this call, which Paul bases on [Isaiah 26:19](#): "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light" ([Ephesians 5:14](#)).

It is encouraging to see what [Isaiah 26:19](#) says: "Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; . . . and the earth shall cast out the dead." In that great resurrection, just as in the [first resurrection](#), God will give "eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality" ([Romans 2:7](#)). Thus, not only a Christian's hope of life after death rests in the resurrection of the dead, but even though they do not realize it, it is also the hope of all those who have never had the opportunity for salvation.

When that occurs, it will be clear that, indeed, "Death is swallowed up in victory" ([1 Corinthians 15:54](#))!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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by Staff

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