

What's The Deal With Death?

Part 4

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In part three, we considered the subject of Gehenna, the Lake of Fire & the Judgment, as well as reflecting on the First Life/Second Life & First Death/Second Death scenario of the NT. We shall now continue with some other elements that belong to the Judgment, as difficult as these things are to contemplate.

"Weeping & Gnashing of Teeth"

There are a number of texts in the gospels that refer to Jesus' teaching about 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' in relation to the judgment -- although this phrase is not always used in the context of 'fire'. Here are two key examples.

"The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall be pulling out of His kingdom all sins and those doing lawlessness, and they shall be throwing them into the furnace of fire. **There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**"

(Matthew 13:41-41 FT)

"I am saying to you, 'I don't know you or where you come from! Withdraw from me, all workers of injustice!' **There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth**, when you are seeing Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out."

(Luke 13:27-28 FT)

The phrase '*weeping and gnashing (or grinding) of teeth*' signifies great sorrow (i.e. wailing or lamentation), mixed with anger, and possibly regret (cf. Acts 7:54; Hebrews 12:16-17). It is used seven times in the gospels, six in Matthew (8:11-12; 13:42 & 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) and once in Luke (quoted above). Only two of these are spoken of in the context of fire, which occurs in the parables of the Wheat and the Darnel, and the Net in Matthew 13. All the others are in the context of one being thrown into outer darkness, as those who are to be excluded from participating in the 'feast' of the kingdom of heaven.

The primary metaphors and motifs that are used in relation to the judgment & condemnation of those who are not God's children are fire and darkness.¹ As we have seen, the fire is usually spoken of in such terms as 'unquenchable fire', 'Gehenna of fire', 'eternal fire', 'furnace of fire', or 'lake of fire'. The 'outer darkness'

or 'blackest darkness' is usually spoken of in the context of the subject being excluded from a feast or celebration; nevertheless, in all these instances, separation & exclusion is one of the central themes – particularly exclusion from the Holy City of God, the New Jerusalem, which is also spoken of as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven (e.g. Matthew 8:10-12; Revelation 22:14-15).

It is interesting to note here that in recent times there has been a lot of emphasis placed on 'inclusion', not only in the Church, but also within society at large. Although there is a place for 'inclusion' within Christianity, depending on the context, the NT explicitly speaks of exclusion & banishment for many, with 'inclusion' being applied only to those within the kingdom & family of God. With God you cannot mix that which is holy with that which is unholy. Although I could wish for Universalism to be true, I believe the divinely inspired NT writers are portraying a very different scenario. God's ways and thoughts are not our ways and thoughts.

This warning of exclusion & banishment had a particular relevance to the religious Jews of Jesus' day, as they presumed that they would automatically be accepted into the kingdom of God – but Jesus warned them that even 'the subjects of the kingdom' (i.e. the Jews) would be thrown out (cf. Matthew 8:10-12). This could also be applied to many Christians who presumptuously think that, as the people of God, no matter how they live, heaven will be waiting for them. The whole teaching of the NT warns us otherwise (e.g. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

In all seven passages of 'weeping & gnashing' listed above, the context is that of a judgment of separation at the coming of the Son of Man. Most translations render the phrase in such a way that it sounds like the 'fire' or the 'darkness' is the actual place where '*the weeping and gnashing of teeth*' will occur, but this is a little misleading. Some literal versions and Interlinears render it differently.

For example, the Greek-English Interlinear by G. R. Berry translates this phrase in all instances as a statement that is related to the judgment being described, as in, "*There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*" This rendering doesn't seem to indicate the location or duration of the 'weeping and gnashing', just the fact that there will be this kind of reaction from many when they are judged before Christ – due to the realisation that they are to be subsequently punished, condemned & rejected, suffering the loss of eternal life.

I do not believe that Jesus was describing a 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' that would never end in a place of fiery torment, as the traditional doctrine of Eternal Torment in Hell teaches. The end of this condemnation, though, is Death – the destruction of the Second Death, the ultimate Gehenna of Fire, which destroys both body and soul (cf. Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 10:28). Only in Christ is there Life.

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

(John 3:36 NIV)

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."

(Acts 4:12 NIV)

Therefore, it truly matters how we live, for not everyone is promised an inheritance in the kingdom of God upon physical death.² Only in Christ is there Life and Immortality.

"Or are you not aware that the unjust shall not be inheriting God's kingdom? Be not deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers shall inherit God's kingdom. And some of you were these, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

(1 Corinthians 6:9-11 FT)

"He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. **But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death...**"

"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. **Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."**

(Revelation 21:6-8; 22:14-15 NIV)

Sobering words indeed! This clearly speaks of exclusion & rejection, not universal inclusion.

Corruption & Destruction

In Galatians 6:7-9, the apostle Paul talked about two different kinds of 'sowing and reaping', relating the results to the judgment. Again, these are weighty words that clearly show two different destinies.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, **from the flesh will reap destruction** (Gk. *phthora*); whoever sows to please the Spirit, **from the Spirit will reap eternal life**. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. (NIV)

Whether we like it or not, we all reap something as we go through life. The one who sows for the flesh, from the flesh will reap *corruption*, while the one who sows for the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap *eternal life*. The 'corruption' is placed over against 'eternal life'. The apostles used terms such as 'corruption' (Gk. *phthora* or *phtheiro*) and 'destruction' or 'ruin' (Gk. *apollumi*, *apoleia* or *olethros* among others) to describe the justice or punishment that God would use against the wicked.

Any good biblical concordance or dictionary will show that the main Greek words used by the NT writers on this subject generally refer to "destruction" or "perishing" in the usual sense that these words are to be understood. Admittedly in some contexts, they can refer to things or persons that are "lost" or "ruined" in the sense that they appear to be no more (lost) or are no longer useful (ruined or wasted). Although this issue is not as clear-cut as it may first appear, the Second Death is evidently equated with corruption, destruction, and that which perishes. This is set in complete contrast to eternal life or immortality & incorruption.

Here are some key texts that speak of this corruption and destruction.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys (*or corrupts*, Gk. *phtheiro*) God's temple, **God will destroy** (*bring to corruption or cause to perish*, Gk. *phtheiro*) **that person**; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

(1 Corinthians 3:16-17 NIV)

But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed (Gk. *phthora*), speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish (Gk. *kataphtheiro*) in their own corruption (Gk. *phthora*)...

(2 Peter 2:12 KJV)

Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin (Gk. *olethros*) and destruction (Gk. *apoleia*).

(1 Timothy 6:9 NIV)

Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: **Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction** (Gk. *olethros*, complete ruin) **from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;**

(2 Thessalonians 1:6-9 KJV)

In this last text, Paul was emphasising that this destruction, which included banishment from God's presence and power, was to be an expression of God's wrath and vengeance upon the wicked, with the punishment being the destruction of the ages (i.e. 'eternal' or 'age-abiding' destruction). This is the equivalent of what Jesus called 'eternal punishment' in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:41-46).

It is evident from the context that the divine vengeance, wrath & punishment here described are not viewed as being corrective, but retributive. It is the 'fire' of the Second Death; and in accordance with how we would normally understand the description of a creature which has 'perished' or been 'destroyed' in a fiery death, this appears to be talking about death in its ultimate sense of complete annihilation

or eventual non-existence, the ultimate punishment for sin. Only in Christ can this Death be avoided.

There was a time when each and every human being did not exist nor was conscious of anything; and then subsequently we were all individually born and became conscious of this world. Without the grace and power of God in resurrection, scripture seems to teach that we would subsequently all perish again in death and be lost (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:17-19). I don't think there is any good reason for accepting the belief that 'immortality' is inherently given to every human being, especially when it relates to the judgment of the Second Death. Immortality and life are only promised to those who love God and who follow Jesus Christ.

In 2 Timothy 1:10, Paul stated that the abolishing of death, along with the giving of life and incorruption, had been brought to light through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is to say, the OT hadn't revealed the details about eternal life and the subject of immortality and incorruption. Only the NT reveals the truth about the true nature of death, and the resurrection to immortality in a spiritual kingdom, the new creation.

In fact, much of what the OT had to say about the Messiah's coming kingdom was often described in earthly, worldly terms that Israel could relate to, but it was only after the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah (particularly after his resurrection) that the Holy Spirit began to reveal the truth through God's apostles and prophets about what all these things really meant (cf. Ephesians 3:2-5). And it was the apostle Paul who was chosen to receive the greatest revelation of these things to present to God's people (cf. Ephesians 3:1-3, 7-11; Colossians 1:25-27; Romans 16:25-27).

At the core of this revelation of the gospel was the newly revealed mystery that the Gentiles were now included in the covenant blessings of Israel, which ultimately had to do with participating in God's kingdom in His world – that is, eternal life in the heavenly realms or spiritual dimension in immortality.

Immortality & Incorruption

To conclude this series on death & resurrection, let us take a brief look at the NT subject of immortality & incorruption.

The Greek word *athanasia* means 'deathlessness', and should be translated as **immortality**, while the Greek word *aphtharsia* means 'without decay', translated as **incorruption** (*aphtharton*; *aphthartos* = incorruptible or imperishable). These words are only used in a handful of passages in the NT.³

The NT reveals that the problem of Sin and Death affects all humanity spiritually, morally and physically, and that God's answer to this is the creation of a new humanity to be resurrected in spiritual bodies like Christ's himself. One of the most significant texts concerning the spiritual resurrection body is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in the great resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians 15.

⁵⁰ **I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God**, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— ⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

For the trumpet will sound, **the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.** ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, **and the mortal with immortality.** ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

(1 Corinthians 15:50-55 NIV)

First comes the emphatic statement that '*flesh and blood* (that is, mortal flesh) *cannot inherit the kingdom of God*'; neither can the perishable (or corruptible) inherit the imperishable (or incorruptible). Simply stated, the normal physical flesh and blood body of humanity, which is corruptible, both physically and morally, cannot partake of the spiritual kingdom of God. The only way that a human body can enjoy 'age-abiding' life in the very presence of God in another dimension is through a resurrection to immortality and incorruption for those who have died.⁴ That is, the natural (or physical; lit. Gk. 'soulish'), corruptible, mortal body of the believer will be changed into a spiritual, incorruptible, immortal body of a new order of humans.

⁴² So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ **it is sown a natural** (Gk. *psuchikos*, 'soulish') **body, it is raised a spiritual** (Gk. *pneumatikos*) **body.**

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵ So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; **the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.** ⁴⁶ The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. ⁴⁷ The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. ⁴⁸ As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; **and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.** ⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

(1 Corinthians 15:42-49 NIV)

Paul was contrasting the present 'natural', flesh & blood, soulish body of humanity (represented in Adam) with the spiritual body of the new humanity (represented in the second and last Adam, Christ Jesus). The focus here is not so much on that of the *body*, but of what kind it is. The natural, soulish body belongs to this material creation, which is perishable or corruptible, and is pictured as being of the dust of the earth, earthly. In contrast to this, the resurrected new humanity in Christ is *spiritual*.

The Greek word *pneumatikos* (spiritual) is always used throughout the NT to refer to things or beings that belong to God's world, the heavenly realm or dimension. Christ as the Son of God is the man from heaven, who is also a life-giving spirit. All those who experience the spiritual Second Birth will bear the image of the Heavenly Man in resurrection; a resurrection that creates a spiritual body fitted out for the heavenly world.

Paul elaborates further on these things in 2 Corinthians 5 where he describes the bodily transformation from one to the other in the metaphorical terms of a temporary tent ('this earthly tabernacle') being replaced by a permanent temple ('a building from God, a heavenly house'), and also to that of putting on new clothes.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² Meanwhile we groan, **longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling**, ³ because **when we are clothed**, we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because **we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life**. ⁵ Now the one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

(2 Corinthians 5:1-5 NIV)

Even though we briefly considered this text earlier in this series, it is worth repeating a few things here. (This passage does have its difficulties, but I believe that Paul was saying the following).

Paul was saying here that the believer's 'flesh & blood' mortal body is like a tent, a temporary dwelling place for God's Spirit; while the future immortal body (which, when received at Christ's Appearing, would swallow up the mortal body by the Life of the immortal one) is likened to a permanent building from God, a heavenly temple. The time in-between is one of longing to be clothed with the immortal spiritual body to complete the redemptive process, so that the spirit of the dead believer will not be left incomplete as though being found naked (that is, we were created to be body, soul and spirit). God's people are not to be disembodied spirits, but resurrected humans in spiritual bodies like the angels, belonging to a new creation as children of the resurrection (cf. Luke 20:34-38).

When the mortal body is swallowed up by the life of the spiritual immortal body, then the scriptures would be fulfilled; '*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death & hades, is your victory?*' (Cf. Isaiah 25:7-8; Hosea 13:14).

This is the very transformation Paul spoke of in his letter to the Philippian Christians also; that of a lowly, humble, infirm body being changed into a glorious body.

²⁰ **But our citizenship is in heaven.** And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, **will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.**

(Philippians 3:20-21 NIV)

This resurrection & transformation would occur in a split second – '*in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye.*' The Greek word translated 'flash' in 1 Corinthians 15:52 above is *atomos* from which the English word *atom* is derived. It literally means 'something that is indivisible;' that is, something occurring in the smallest moment of time, in an instant, in a flash; in the blinking (twinkling) of an eye. Paul was saying that this

event would occur so fast in human terms that literally if you blinked you would miss it!

Hence for believers in Christ to inherit the kingdom of God (i.e. to receive eternal life) there needs to be a resurrection/transformation into a spiritual body that is immortal and incorruptible. Only this change will result in victory over Sin and Death – spiritually, morally and physically (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:50-57; also 42-44). Primarily the '*incorruption*' of the spiritual body deals with Sin (sin being moral corruption and spiritual death), while the '*immortality*' deals with Death (not only physical death, but the spiritual death that is the absence of true life).

Conclusion

In every instance where the Greek words *athanasia* & *aphtharsia* are used in the NT they only refer to either God himself, or Jesus (after his resurrection), or believers in Christ as the true children of God; that is, immortality and incorruption are not specifically promised to anyone else outside of Christ at the resurrection and judgment. It is either Life or Death.

There is good reason to believe that there is no such thing, biblically speaking, as the inherent immortal soul. Even the Eden Paradise story in Genesis 2-3 tells us that immortality or eternal life, represented in the Tree of Life, is placed out of the reach of Adam as the first 'divine covenant' man due to his transgression. The fruit of this Tree was initially only available to the 'covenant couple' within the garden paradise that had been graciously provided by the Creator, to be enjoyed in fellowship with Him. Disobedience and sin had placed the Life Tree out of reach due to Adam's banishment from Paradise.

In fact, it was only due to the mercy of God that Adam & Eve were not killed immediately for their sin, which was the initial penalty for the transgression, but instead they were clothed with the skins of an innocent animal sacrifice provided by God to cover their new-found nakedness (Genesis 2:17; 3:21-24). This, of course, was a foreshadowing of the New Covenant Sacrifice that would be graciously provided for later in the form of Jesus as the Lamb of God, who would take upon himself the sins of mankind to clothe the nakedness of human works that lead to death (cf. Romans 3:21-26; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-21; Hebrews 9:12-15).

Also, as part of one of the 'judgment curses' pronounced upon Adam & the ground was the emphasis on Adam's return to the dust from whence he had come (Genesis 3:17-19). There isn't any indication within the Genesis account of continued immortality being automatically given to Adam or any other human after death. The return to dust appears pretty final. Only by the grace and mercy of God can provision be made for sinful humans to return to Paradise – and this is ultimately achieved in Christ.

God alone is the Source of all life, and He alone has immortality; yet the life within himself is shared with his Son, Christ Jesus (cf. 1 Timothy 6:15-16; 1 Timothy 1:17; John 5:26); and is subsequently shared with all those who are in Christ (cf. John 3:36; 5:28-29; 1 John 5:11-12; 1 Peter 1:23-25).⁵ Paradise has been restored, with access to the Tree of Life having been flung wide open, which provides immortality; but there is only one way, and only one gateway, into this Divine Paradise of the New World or New Creation.

Abbreviations: FT = Free Translation based on the texts of the New International Version (NIV) & George Ricker Berry's Interlinear Greek-English NT (GRBNT).

Endnotes

¹ The 'fire' and the 'darkness' are metaphors, but their actual meaning is described variously as 'destruction', 'punishment', 'condemnation', separation & banishment, and 'the Second Death'.

² For example: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5-7; Colossians 3:5-6; Revelation 21:7-8; 22:14-15.

³ *Athanasia*: 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54; 1 Timothy 6:16; *Aphtharsia*: Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:42, 50, 53, 54; Ephesians 6:24; 2 Timothy 1:10; *Aphthartos*: Romans 1:23; 1 Corinthians 9:25; 15:52; 1 Timothy 1:17; 1 Peter 1:4, 23; 3:4. Taken from Appendix II of *Raised Immortal: Resurrection & Immortality in the NT* by Murray J. Harris, (1985, Eerdmans Publishing).

⁴ This passage does include the revelation of a 'mystery' that refers to a change or metamorphosis into immortality for the living believers who were to remain alive in the Day of the Lord Jesus. I have considered the subject of this living transformation, commonly called the 'rapture' or 'snatching away', in my series *The Day of the Lord, the Royal Appearing*.

⁵ For a thorough, detailed examination of these issues of death, immortality and resurrection, see the epic *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N. T. Wright, (SPCK, 2003); *Raised Immortal: Resurrection & Immortality in the NT*, Murray J. Harris, (1985, Eerdmans Publishing); & *The Fire That Consumes*, Edward William Fudge, (Third Edition, 2011, Cascade Books), which also deals with the nature of final punishment and conditional immortality.