
Immortality Gift or Birthright?

*A Biblical Journey Through Death, Hell,
Resurrection, and the Lake of Fire*

by
Oludare Akinbo

*"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have
the Son of God does not have life."*

— 1 John 5:12 NKJV



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This work is offered in the memory of Oluwatohungbogbo Toluwalope Akinbo (1977 — 2024).

Dedication



To the loving memory of
Oluwatohungbogbo Toluwalope Akinbo
(1977 – 2024)

*my beloved wife,
who fell asleep in Christ,
and awaits, with all who have died in Him,
the sound of the trumpet.*

Acknowledgements



My first and deepest thanks go to **God**, who sustained me, gave me life, and blessed me with my dear wife Oluwatohungbogbo. He called us both into His truth and gave us the words of life that lit our path and were our strength through the years of our life together — and have been my strength even now, in the years since she went on ahead of us.

To my children — **Oluwadurotiwa**, *the strength of my arm*; **Olaoluwatomiwale**, *my miracle child and heartbeat*; and **Oluwanifewa**, *my gentle, strong treasure* — thank you. You were far stronger than any of us would have expected. You stood for me and with me. You were unusually sensitive, deeply attentive, and present in every way that mattered, especially in the months when I felt that the road ahead without your mother would be a difficult one. You did your very best to be there for me, and you were. I love you more than these words on a page can carry.

To **Ruth Morenike Akinbo** — the dear, gracious, gentle daughter of the Most High whom God in His tender wisdom gave to me, to walk the rest of this journey with — thank you. Thank you for choosing me. Thank you for choosing this life with me. Thank you for choosing my children, with a heart so steady, so unassuming, and so completely your own. Your empathy, your quiet faith, your warmth, and your constant, loyal care for our family made it possible for me to feel God's gentle nudge toward healing in a season I had thought beyond

healing. Through you, the light returned. The laughter returned. The music returned to a home that had grown quiet. Our house is once again filled — full of care, full of attention, full of love, full of laughter. I thank God for you daily. For the woman of grace you are. For the woman of grace you are becoming. For the blessing you have been, and continue to be, to me and to our children. Morenike — *the one I have found, the one I cherish* — thank you.

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Before We Begin



My four-year-old brother died of measles when I was fourteen.

I heard what the neighbours said as they came in waves of commiseration. I heard what the relatives said as they sat with us in the days that followed. I heard what the many people from various churches said as they came to comfort us. I heard what my own father said — and my father was no ordinary believer. He was an Evangelist, a devoted, passionate, prayerful man who had stood over my brother's bed assuring us that God would heal him. The prayers had been fervent. The faith had been real. The healing had not come.

And so the questions began.

Why would God allow this? Why take a four-year-old? Why allow him to suffer so much before going? Surely his sins could not have caused his death. He had barely begun to live. If the prayers of an Evangelist father and a believing household could not move God to heal him, what did this say about prayer, about God's character, about how the universe actually works?

And — most quietly, most stubbornly, most importantly — *where was he now?*

The well-meaning words came thick and warm. *He has gone to be with God. He is now an angel in heaven watching over us. He is in a better place.* I wanted to believe every word. I needed to believe every word. And in a small, quiet corner of me that I could not have explained at the time, I did not. Not entirely.

Something in me wanted to know what the Bible itself said, not what we were telling each other to bear the pain.

That quiet question began the longest journey of my life.

It led me, before I was fifteen, to Henry Carr Public Library — a forty-five-minute walk from my school in each direction. I had no extra money for public transport; the going and the returning were on foot. Only the personal drive of a boy who could not let the question go carried me there. I walked after school, read what I could, and walked back to my bus stop in time to catch the bus home. I did this for months. I would not have used the word *research* then — I was a boy looking for an answer to a wound — but research is what it became.

Before I was seventeen, I had come across materials that opened the Scriptures to me in ways I had never been taught in any pulpit. Patterns I had never noticed. Verses I had been quietly skipping over without realizing it. Truths that were comforting, assuring, dignifying — and far from the traditional understanding I had received from most of the Christian world around me.

That was the beginning. But the question that had begun with my brother soon widened into questions I had not anticipated.

For if my brother — a child, born into a Christian household, surrounded by prayer — had questions hanging over his eternity, what of the others? What of the millions of human beings who have died over the millennia without ever hearing the name of Jesus Christ? What of those who lived and died long before He was born? What of those whom God, in His mysterious sovereignty, sent no one to — unlike the Ninevites, to whom He sent the prophet Jonah, dragging him back when he tried to flee?

What of the nations of Canaan, whom Israel was commanded to drive out without the long centuries of prophetic warning that other nations later received?

What of the words of Jesus Himself: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6)? What of Peter's testimony before the Sanhedrin, that *"there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12)?

If these words mean what they appear to mean, what becomes of the countless souls who never had the chance to hear?

These were not academic questions. They were the questions a wounded boy carried into adulthood. They became the questions that drove the next several decades of my life — through study, through research, through the patient mercy of God's grace and calling, through years of learning under teachers wiser than myself, through years of teaching and ministry, through the slow accumulation of understanding that comes only when one walks long enough with the Word that the Word begins to walk with you.

During those decades, I had also been given the gift of a wife. I married Oluwatohungbogbo when she was in her early twenties and I in my early thirties. From the beginning, she shared my love of God's Word. She was an eager and willing companion as I discovered new things in Scripture and brought them home to share. She was not by nature a reader; she was more drawn to physical work, to tasks her hands could finish, to the practical service of the home and the people in it. But she had a listening heart. When I came home from a passage, a study, a long meditation, full of what God had been showing me, she would sit and hear me out. She would ask. She would

consider. She would let what God was showing me become, by way of our conversation, something He was showing us.

She encouraged me steadily in my desire to keep *growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18). Her willingness to walk that road beside me, in the way that fit her own temperament, was one of the steadying gifts of my adult life. It held us through the tough seasons that fracture and break so many marriages. We were never in doubt of each other's love for God, of each other's love for His Word and for His way of life, or of each other's commitment to keep growing in Him even in the seasons when our human nature pulled us, as it pulls every honest believer, toward the falls and failures we must daily resist. Beneath all of that — and because of all of that — our love for each other was unshakeable.

And then came the test that no amount of study can prepare a man for.

For one full year, my beloved wife Oluwatohungbogbo battled leukaemia. I dropped everything I was doing and gave my whole self to that fight. I was told the leukaemia was an aggressive form, advancing fast, and that the small chance of survival lay in a bone marrow or stem cell transplant. There and then, as the heavy, shocking diagnosis settled over us, I determined that she would, by God's grace, be among the few who survive. We flew to India for treatment and spent seven of the most grueling months of my life there. They remain the most painful season I have ever lived through, yet seven months in which the mercy of God was unmistakably interwoven with the pain. Three months of chemotherapy passed smoothly. Then came radiation and the stem cell transplant. Thirteen days after the transplant, graft-versus-host disease of the gut struck. By the next

morning she was in intensive care, and there she remained through three of the most harrowing months I have ever known. A further month of gradual recovery in the ward followed before we could finally bring her home — home to the warmth of family and loved ones for the slow work of healing. Four months of that slow healing passed quietly. And then the cancer relapsed. A month after that, against every hope we had been encouraged to hold, she went on ahead of us.

The understandings I had spent decades gathering from the Scriptures were the very things that steadied us both through that long year. They were what I held onto as I watched her grow weaker. They were what she held onto as she endured. She fought bravely, and she fought quietly. When well-meaning friends urged us to run from one prayer house to another, to seek out one special anointing after another, she refused. She would receive prayer gratefully from anyone who offered it on her behalf; but she would not consent to chase prophets or queue at altar after altar as though God were distant and had to be reached through the right intermediary. She knew the Father better than that — she held to the simple, intimate, unbroken nearness of the child to the parent, God close, attentive, present, and she would not live her closing months as though that were not so. Her faith was quiet, fervent, and unshakeable; she would not allow her last months to be spent chasing what she did not believe she needed to chase. Even in her weakness, she focused most of her attention not on her own suffering but on me — apologizing, again and again, for what she imagined she was "putting me through," as if her sickness and all the challenges that came with it were a burden she had no right to lay upon her husband. I answered her with all the ardent, gentle conviction I could find, and with the tears

of anguish I could not always hide as I watched her grow weaker month by month. I told her she must never think of herself that way. I pleaded with her not to give up — not on me, not on our children, not on the life we were still asking God to give back to us. I begged her not to grow discouraged, not to grow weary of the ordeals — ordeals that, even now, more than two years later, remain raw and gut-wrenching to speak or write about. She entrusted herself wholly to God's hands as her body failed her, until at last she lapsed into semi-consciousness. Five days later, in April 2024, she passed on. These long-gathered glimpses of what God has actually revealed about death, the dead, and the resurrection became the gentle but firm hands by which God nudged me back to sanity through the deep pain and ache of her loss.

They did not remove the grief.

But they gave the grief its shape, its limits, and its hope.

Even through the deepest pain and ache and tears, a subtle but steady comfort throbbed beneath the anguish — the words of Paul to the Thessalonians, that we "*sorrow not as others who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). And so I did not say goodbye to my wife with finality. I said it as one says farewell to a beloved who has stepped briefly out of sight — knowing the parting is temporary, knowing the reunion is sure. I shall see her again. Whole. Immortal. A divine child of God. At the resurrection. When the trumpet sounds and the dead in Christ rise first. When "*this mortal must put on immortality, and this corruptible must put on incorruption*" (1 Corinthians 15:53), as Paul wrote. That hope has walked beside me through every day since.

Turning to it helped me in ways I now hope it may help others who read these pages — others standing at gravesides, others receiving terminal diagnoses, others trying to find words for what we are to make of those who have gone on ahead, and others trying to live with questions that began for them long ago, perhaps when they were as young as I was, and have never quite been answered.

That kind of faith — the faith that steadied Oluwatohungbogbo through her illness and that has steadied me in the years since — is not the rare possession of the few. It is the patient, scripturally grounded faith available to every child of God who will reach for it. For readers who wish to consider, in fuller depth, how such a faith is built, grown, and sustained through the hard knocks of life, I would gently point to another book in the same free library at oludareakinbo.com — *Yet Will I Trust Him: Standing on God's Promises When the Answer Tarries* — which traces what Oluwatohungbogbo and I, and countless faithful souls across the millennia, leaned upon when our circumstances offered us nothing else to lean upon.

There was, however, one further moment that finally moved me from quiet conviction to the writing of this particular book.

A dear friend, well-meaning and concerned for souls, shared with me an AI-generated video purporting to depict the end of sinners. The visualization was graphic in ways no honest preacher of an earlier generation would have attempted. Huge sheets of living, flowing fire. Worms and insects writhing in and out of rotting, burning skin. Faces twisted in soundless screams, melting and reforming as the fire consumed them without ever consuming them. And across the bottom of the screen, in solemn lettering, the words: *Can you endure this for all eternity?*

I watched it through to the end. I felt what the maker of the video intended me to feel — the recoil of the soul, the pulling of the fear that has been used for centuries to drive men and women toward the church doors.

And then I thought of the millions of souls who lived and died before Christ ever walked the earth, and the millions more who have died since without ever having heard His name. I thought of the Ninevites and the Canaanites and the words of Peter about no other name under heaven. I thought of the God who, the Scriptures repeatedly tell us, *takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked* (Ezekiel 33:11). I thought of the long, patient years of study by which God had quietly shown me that the Bible does not, in fact, teach what that video so vividly portrayed.

I thought, too, of my wife — not in fear, for she sleeps in Christ awaiting the trumpet, but in gratitude for the gospel of resurrection that had held me upright at her graveside. That gospel stood in dignified, silent contrast to everything on the screen.

And I knew that the time had come to gather, from all I had read and jotted and written and learnt and taught across the decades, a careful, prayerful, scriptural answer.

This booklet is that answer. It is for the friend who shared the video, and for the makers of the video, and for the millions of believers who have been formed in fear by such imagery, and for every reader who has sensed, somewhere quiet within, that the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ cannot be the same God who tortures His creatures forever without end.

It is the long, slow, prayerful answer I came to. It is not the answer of a man writing from a seminary. It is the answer of a man writing from a graveside — two graves, in fact, over fifty

years apart. I offer it here not because I am certain of every detail, but because the path I walked is one I believe other grieving Christians may find helpful.

For centuries, the doctrine of hell has occupied a central place in Christian preaching. The warning of final judgment has often been used to awaken the conscience, to expose the seriousness of sin, and to call men and women to repentance through faith in Jesus Christ. Scripture itself contains solemn warnings about judgment, the Lake of Fire, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the consequences of rejecting God's gracious offer of salvation. These warnings should never be minimized or dismissed.

Yet beneath every discussion about hell lies a more fundamental question that is often overlooked.

What is the true nature of man?

Before we can understand the meaning of death, the Lake of Fire, or eternal punishment, we must first ask whether human beings are inherently immortal or whether immortality is a gift that God alone bestows. The answer to that question quietly shapes everything that follows.

Many Christians assume that because every human being possesses an immortal soul, the dead must continue existing forever, either in bliss (the just) or in conscious torment (sinners). But is that assumption actually stated in Scripture, or has it become so familiar that it is seldom examined?

This booklet does not seek to weaken the biblical warnings concerning judgment, nor does it attempt to make God's justice appear less severe. It does not aim to criticize those who hold the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment.

Many faithful Christians, deeply devoted to the authority of Scripture and to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, sincerely believe that view best reflects the biblical witness. I have walked with such believers, prayed with them, and learned from them. This booklet is not written against them.

It is an invitation to reopen the Scriptures together and ask whether our assumptions about death, immortality, hell, and final judgment arise from the biblical text itself or from conclusions that deserve fresh examination in the light of the whole counsel of God.

Throughout these pages, one guiding principle will shape our study:

The clearer passages of Scripture should help us understand those that are more difficult, and the testimony of the whole Bible should carry greater weight than any single passage considered in isolation.

We shall therefore begin where God begins. Not with hell. Not with judgment. Not even with death. We shall begin with creation. For before we can understand what happens when a person dies, we must first understand what kind of being God created.

This study will not ask the reader to abandon long-held beliefs simply because another interpretation exists. Instead, it invites every reader to imitate the noble Bereans, who *"received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so"* (Acts 17:11).

May that same spirit of humility, honesty, and reverence guide my pen as I write, and your heart as you read.

CHAPTER ONE

What Is Man?



"Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

Genesis 2:7 (NKJV)

Every lasting structure rests upon a solid foundation. The same is true of biblical doctrine. Before we attempt to understand death, hell, resurrection, or the Lake of Fire, we must first understand what God reveals about human nature.

Surprisingly, this foundational question is often overlooked. Many discussions about the destiny of the wicked begin with the sayings of Jesus concerning Gehenna, the visions of Revelation, or the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Yet the Bible itself begins elsewhere. Before God tells us what becomes of man, He first tells us what man is.

When we lose a four-year-old, or any loved one, we reach for words that will let us survive the loss. But the words we reach for must also be true. So we begin where God began.

Created, Not Self-Existent

The opening words of Genesis immediately establish a distinction that remains true throughout Scripture.

God is the Creator. Everything else is creation.

Unlike humanity, God has no beginning. He is eternal, self-existent, and dependent upon no one for His life. Scripture repeatedly describes Him as the One *"who gives to all life, breath, and all things"* (Acts 17:25). David likewise declares, *"For with You is the fountain of life"* (Psalm 36:9).

Life originates with God. Life is sustained by God. Life belongs to God.

Human beings, however, are not self-existent. Every heartbeat, every breath, every moment of consciousness is a gift from the One *"in whom we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28). The Psalmist asked the question this chapter takes for its title:

"What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor." — Psalm 8:4–5

The Psalmist is humbled by the mystery of his own existence. He does not assume that humanity is a self-contained, self-perpetuating being. He sees humanity as the creature of an attentive God.

David elsewhere reminds us, *"For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust"* (Psalm 103:14). This distinction may seem obvious, but it is fundamental to everything that follows. If only God possesses life inherently, then human life is always dependent life.

Formed from the Dust

Genesis describes man's creation with remarkable simplicity:

"Then the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."

Genesis 2:7

Three simple steps are described. First, God formed the body from the dust. Second, He breathed into that body the breath of life. Third, the result was a living being.

Notice carefully what the text says — and what it does not say.

It does not say that God placed an immortal soul into Adam. It does not describe the soul as a separate conscious entity inhabiting the body. Instead, it says that **the man became** a living being.

Job confirms this very pattern when he says, *"The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life"* (Job 33:4). And Isaiah writes that God is the One *"who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it"* (Isaiah 42:5).

The Hebrew expression translated *living being* or *living soul* is **nephesh chayyah**. This expression appears elsewhere in Genesis to describe birds, fish, cattle, and other living creatures (Genesis 1:20–21, 24, 30). This does not mean that humans and animals are identical. Scripture clearly distinguishes humanity as uniquely created in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27).

Rather, it reminds us that the Hebrew word *nephesh* does not, by itself, mean an immortal soul. Depending upon its context, it can refer to a living creature, a person, a life, or even one's desires and appetites. This observation invites us to let Scripture define its own terms instead of assuming later meanings.

PERSON BOX

ADAM: The First Witness

Adam stands at the head of the human race. His story is our story. What he received, we received. What he lost, we lost.

When God formed him, Adam did not begin to exist as a soul that took up residence in a body. He began to exist as a unified living being. Genesis is careful to say so: *the man became a living being*. The body was formed first; the breath of life was given second; the result was Adam — a whole person, body and life together.

Adam was not given immortality at his creation. He was placed in a garden where the Tree of Life stood as a continual reminder that everlasting life is found in fellowship with God. As long as Adam ate of that Tree, he would live. Cut off from it, he would die.

When Adam sinned, the LORD God said something that quietly changes everything we think we know about human nature: "*And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever...*" (Genesis 3:22).

Notice the logic of the sentence. God did not say, "*Lest Adam exercise the immortality I gave him.*" He said, "*Lest he reach toward the Tree and gain what he does not yet have.*" God then drove Adam from the Garden and stationed cherubim and a flaming sword to guard the way to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:24).

If Adam had been created with an inherent, deathless soul, this verse becomes incoherent. There would be no need to bar him from the Tree of Life. The very act of barring him is God's testimony that everlasting life was never something Adam possessed in himself.

What Adam lost was not an immortal soul. It was access to the Source of life.

The whole Bible is the story of how that access is restored — not by inheritance, not by birthright, but by gift. The Tree of Life that was lost in Genesis appears again in Revelation, where the redeemed are given access once more (Revelation 22:1–2). Between those two trees lies the entire drama of redemption. Adam is therefore the first witness against the doctrine of inherent immortality. He was formed from dust. He was animated by breath. He was sustained by the Tree of Life. He died.

What was true of Adam is true of every son and daughter of Adam ever since.

Created in the Image of God

If humanity's uniqueness is not simply that we possess a *nephesh*, then what sets us apart? Genesis answers plainly: "*Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...*" (Genesis 1:26).

Being created in God's image is what distinguishes humanity from every other earthly creature. This image includes capacities that reflect God's character in ways not attributed to the animal kingdom. Human beings reason, create, communicate through language, exercise moral responsibility, form deep relationships, appreciate beauty, and possess the ability to know, worship, and obey their Creator.

The Apostle Paul sheds further light on this uniqueness when he writes:

"For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the

things of God except the Spirit of God."

1 Corinthians 2:11

Paul distinguishes between the **spirit of man** and the **Spirit of God**. The human spirit enables us to understand human thoughts, intentions, and experiences. The Holy Spirit enables us to understand the things of God.

The Bible therefore presents humanity as both physical and spiritual without giving a detailed philosophical explanation of how body, soul, and spirit relate to one another. Its concern is not speculation but revelation. God is described elsewhere as *"the God of the spirits of all flesh"* (Numbers 16:22) — a beautiful phrase that suggests He knows the inner life of every person who has ever drawn breath.

The Spirit Returns to God

Ecclesiastes adds another important piece to the picture:

"Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."

Ecclesiastes 12:7

This verse teaches two undeniable truths. The body returns to the dust. The spirit returns to God.

Christians have understood this passage in different ways. Some conclude that the spirit is the conscious person who continues living immediately after death. Others understand the spirit to be the God-given aspect of human life and identity that returns to its Creator until the resurrection.

This booklet will examine the relevant Scriptures before drawing conclusions. For now, it is enough to recognize that Ecclesiastes affirms humanity's complete dependence upon

God in both life and death. Whatever the spirit of man is, it is His gift, and to Him it returns.

An Illustration

At this point, an illustration may help — not as a biblical argument, but simply as a way of visualizing one possible understanding.

Think of a modern smartphone. The physical device may be compared to the human body. Without electrical power, it cannot function. Likewise, without the breath of life, the human body cannot live.

Now imagine that the phone contains a secure digital identity that stores essential information unique to its owner. If the phone is damaged beyond repair, that information can still be preserved and restored to another device.

In a similar way, one may think of the human spirit as the God-given aspect of our being through which our unique identity is known and preserved by God. Scripture tells us that the spirit returns to God who gave it. The resurrection then becomes God's act of restoring the whole person — not merely preserving an immortal component that never truly died.

Like every illustration, this one has limitations. It should never be mistaken for a definition of the human spirit. Its purpose is simply to help us appreciate that God's promise is not merely survival after death but the restoration of life through resurrection.

Humanity's Present Condition

One word appears repeatedly throughout Scripture in reference to mankind. **Mortal.**

Job asks, "*Can mortal man be more righteous than God?*" (Job 4:17). Paul exhorts believers, "*Do not let sin reign in your mortal body*" (Romans 6:12). Later he declares, "*This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality*" (1 Corinthians 15:53).

These verses are significant because they consistently describe mortality as humanity's present condition. They also point forward to something greater. Immortality is presented not as humanity's present possession, but as something that must one day be *put on*.

What we have already seen, then, is clear enough. But the question runs deeper than that. If immortality is not now ours, two possibilities still remain.

The first is that God has nevertheless woven immortality into every human soul at creation, so that whether a person is righteous or wicked, that immortality endures — in joy or in conscious torment — forever.

The second is that immortality is a gift God offers but does not impose; that He bestows it through Jesus Christ upon those who have been justified before Him; and that those who finally reject this gift do not endure forever, because the life they refused was never theirs by nature in the first place.

Both views are held by sincere believers. They lead, however, to very different conclusions about the destiny of the wicked and about the meaning of the final judgment.

Before considering the nature of hell or the Lake of Fire, then, we must first answer the more fundamental question:

Is immortality a birthright bestowed upon every soul at creation, or is it a gift granted by God only to those who,

through Jesus Christ, have been justified before Him?

That question lies at the heart of everything that follows.

CHAPTER TWO

Immortality – Birthright or Gift?



"To those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honour and immortality, eternal life."

Romans 2:7

In Nigeria, in much of Africa, in much of the world, we routinely speak of our departed loved ones as if they were still consciously present.

We say that a mother is praying for her children in heaven. We say that a father is watching over his son's wedding. We say that a beloved grandparent is interceding before God on our behalf. We say these things tenderly and instinctively. When a friend of mine lost her mother, a relative reported having seen the deceased mother in the marketplace two weeks after the burial — apparently scolding him for letting his "aged mother" go shopping alone. My friend received this account with genuine comfort. *Mama, she said, had come back one last time before retiring to heaven.*

I did not contradict her. The wound was too fresh. But I could not stop thinking about it.

Because if our culture's instinct is right — if the dead are conscious, active, and capable of revisiting the living — then the Bible's repeated insistence that the dead *sleep* until the resurrection becomes a hard saying we have all quietly set aside.

This raises a question we cannot avoid much longer.

Is immortality something every human being already possesses, or is it a gift that God alone bestows?

The answer to this question profoundly influences how we understand death, resurrection, eternal life, and ultimately the Lake of Fire.

For many Christians, the answer seems obvious. It is commonly believed that every person possesses an immortal soul that can never cease to exist. According to this understanding, the righteous will enjoy everlasting life with God, while the wicked will exist forever under His judgment.

Yet a careful reading of Scripture invites us to ask another question.

Does the Bible ever plainly state that every human being is inherently immortal?

Rather than assuming the answer, let us examine the biblical evidence.

Life Was Always God's Gift

The story begins in Eden. Adam and Eve were created perfect, yet they were not presented as self-existent beings. Their lives depended entirely upon God, who formed them, breathed into them the breath of life, and placed them in a garden where the Tree of Life stood as a visible reminder that life comes from Him (Genesis 2:7-9).

After Adam and Eve sinned, something remarkable happened. God said,

*"Lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life,
and eat, and live forever..."*

Genesis 3:22

He then drove them from the Garden and stationed cherubim to guard the way to the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:24).

This raises an important question. If humanity already possessed inherent immortality, why prevent access to the Tree of Life to stop man from living forever? The passage naturally suggests that everlasting life was never independent of God. It was His gift, symbolized by the Tree of Life, and access to that gift was lost through sin.

Moses later sets the same offer before Israel:

*"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you,
that I have set before you life and death, blessing and
cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your
descendants may live."*

Deuteronomy 30:19

Life is presented as a choice — something that must be received. It is not a possession that one already has by virtue of

being human.

The Bible begins, therefore, not with immortal humanity, but with humanity separated from the source of eternal life.

God Alone Possesses Immortality

One of the clearest statements in the New Testament is found in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Speaking of God, Paul writes:

"Who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see."

1 Timothy 6:16

These words deserve careful attention. Paul does not say that God possesses *more* immortality than humanity. He says that God **alone** possesses immortality in Himself.

God's life is underived. It depends upon no one. Everything else that lives receives life from Him.

Jesus expressed a similar truth when He declared, *"For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself"* (John 5:26).

Life belongs to God by nature. It is given to creation by grace.

The Promise of Eternal Life

Throughout the New Testament, eternal life is consistently presented as something God *gives* — not something humanity already possesses.

Perhaps the best-known example is Romans 6:23.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Notice Paul's contrast. He contrasts **death** with **eternal life**. Death is earned. Eternal life is given. The verse does not contrast eternal life in heaven with eternal life in hell. It contrasts death with life.

Jesus likewise said,

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

John 3:16

Again, the contrast is striking. Perish. Or everlasting life. Jesus did not contrast everlasting life with everlasting conscious misery. He contrasted perishing with life.

The Apostle John later summarizes the gospel in these simple words:

"And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." –

1 John 5:11–12

Notice that John does not merely say that believers have a better quality of life. He says they **have life**. Conversely, those who reject the Son **do not have life**. This statement deserves to be read carefully in the light of every other passage concerning judgment.

Seeking Immortality

Another passage often receives less attention than it deserves. Paul writes that God will grant eternal life to those who,

*"...by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory,
honour and immortality..."*

Romans 2:7

Why would believers seek immortality if every human being already possesses it?

Similarly, Paul writes concerning the resurrection,

*"This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this
mortal must put on immortality."*

1 Corinthians 15:53

The language is deliberate. Immortality is something to be **put on**. It is presented as the future transformation of those who belong to Christ.

This observation does not, by itself, settle every theological question. However, it strongly suggests that immortality is not described in Scripture as humanity's natural condition.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

The New Testament connects eternal life with the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul writes,

"If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His."

Romans 8:9

He continues,

*"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 through His Spirit who dwells in
you."*

Romans 8:11

The emphasis falls upon **our mortal bodies**. The Holy Spirit is God's pledge that mortality will one day give way to immortality. Elsewhere Paul describes the Holy Spirit as "the guarantee" or "deposit" of our inheritance until the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5).

These passages point forward to a future inheritance. The Holy Spirit is not merely a comforting presence in this life. He is God's assurance that those who belong to Christ will one day receive the fullness of eternal life through the resurrection.

Life and Immortality Brought to Light

One verse, perhaps more than any other, deserves to be the climax of this chapter. Paul writes to Timothy of God's purpose in Christ Jesus:

"...who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."

2 Timothy 1:10

Read those words slowly.

Life and immortality were **brought to light through the gospel**.

If immortality had always been the natural possession of every human being, what would there have been to *bring to light*? If every human being had been born with an undying soul, the gospel could not have introduced immortality to the world. It would have done no more than introduce one or two new facts about something everyone already had.

Paul says something very different. He says immortality was brought to light through the gospel. It was hidden until Christ revealed it. It was unknown until Christ embodied it. It is now offered through Him to all who would receive it.

This is the heart of the matter.

Christ did not come to inform us about a quality of our being we had always possessed. He came to bring us a gift we had never had.

A Question That Cannot Be Ignored

At this point, an important question naturally arises.

If eternal life is repeatedly described as God's gift... If immortality must be *put on*... If only God possesses immortality inherently... If those who have the Son have life, while those who reject Him do not have life... If life and immortality were brought to light through the gospel rather than woven into human nature from creation...

Then we can hear Paul's words in Romans 6:23 — "*the wages of sin is death*" — for what they actually say. Only the mortal can die. If humanity were inherently immortal at birth, this verse could not have been written as it stands. The wages of sin would have had to be something other than death — unending conscious existence in suffering, perhaps. Paul does not say so. He says the wages are death. The verse is not a difficulty for the position we have been examining; it is another quiet confirmation of it.

What remains for us to examine, then, is not whether immortality is humanity's birthright. The Scriptures we have walked through together have answered that. What remains is to understand what Paul, and the rest of Scripture, mean by *death* itself.

Does death mean the end of physical life while consciousness continues — forever, in torment in hell? Even to ask the

question this way is to set aside the weight of scripture we have just walked through. Yet many sincere believers do hold this view, and the question must therefore be asked openly.

Or does death mean the ultimate, permanent cessation of life and of any form of consciousness — what Revelation calls "*the second death*"?

These questions lead us naturally into the next stage of our study.

Before examining the biblical words translated *hell*, we must first understand the biblical meaning of *death*. For if Scripture consistently declares that "*the wages of sin is death*," then we must allow the Bible itself to explain what death means before deciding what the final judgment entails.

SELFEXAM

Have I Heard the Gift?

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6:23

Read the verse slowly. Read it again. Notice that Paul does not say *the gift of God is eternal life in heaven for those who are already immortal*. He says *the gift of God is eternal life*. Life itself is the gift. Without it, there is death.

Have I heard eternal life as a gift to be received, or have I assumed it as a possession I already own? What might change in the way I live this day, and the way I love those around me, if I held eternal life as the gracious, personal gift it actually is?

CHAPTER THREE

What Does the Bible Mean by Death?



"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 6:23

Few words appear more frequently in Scripture than the word **death**. Yet few are more often assumed than carefully defined.

When modern readers encounter the word, they frequently bring with them theological conclusions already formed. Some understand death primarily as separation from God. Others see it as the separation of an immortal soul from the body. Still others understand it as the cessation of life until the resurrection.

Rather than beginning with any theological system, we must once again ask a simpler question:

How does the Bible itself describe death?

Death Entered Through Sin

Death was not part of God's original creation. After creating the heavens, the earth, and all living things, God repeatedly declared His work to be "very good" (Genesis 1:31). There was no hint that death formed part of His ideal purpose for humanity.

That changed when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The Lord warned Adam, *"...in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). From that moment onward, death became humanity's common experience. Paul later explains, *"Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned"* (Romans 5:12).

Death is therefore presented not as a friend or a natural step toward something better, but as the consequence of sin. It is an intruder into God's good creation.

What Died?

Some readers point out that Adam did not physically die on the very day he ate the forbidden fruit. That observation is correct. Adam continued living for many years.

Yet something profound also changed immediately. His fellowship with God was broken. He was driven from the Garden. Access to the Tree of Life was removed. From that day onward, he became subject to mortality and eventually returned to the dust, just as God had declared (Genesis 3:19).

The sentence of death began that very day, even though its full consequence unfolded over the course of Adam's earthly life. The Bible often speaks of events in this way. A judgment may be pronounced at one moment while its complete execution

occurs later.

The genealogy of Genesis 5 then drives home what had happened. Read it slowly, and you will hear a refrain repeating like the tolling of a bell:

"...and he died." "...and he died." "...and he died."

From Adam to Noah, the curse falls. The breath returns. The dust returns. Mortality is not described; it is enacted, line after line, name after name. The chapter that should have been a celebration of human flourishing becomes an obituary.

Death Is the Enemy

One of Paul's most striking statements appears in his great chapter on the resurrection.

"The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."

1 Corinthians 15:26

Notice that death is called an **enemy**. It is not presented as humanity's liberation. Nor is it described as God's ultimate purpose.

Death is something Christ came to conquer. Indeed, the gospel proclaims not merely that Jesus survived death but that He defeated it. Through His resurrection He broke its power and opened the way to everlasting life.

If death is the last enemy, then the Christian hope is not found in death itself. It is found in the resurrection beyond death.

The Old Testament Witness — What the Dead Know

If the dead are consciously active — visiting the living, watching over us from heaven, interceding before God on our behalf — then the Old Testament writers seem not to have known. Again and again, in passage after passage, the inspired writers describe death not as a transition into a more vivid form of consciousness but as the cessation of conscious activity until God should choose to restore it.

Consider the testimony of the Psalms.

"For in death there is no remembrance of You; in the grave who will give You thanks?"

Psalm 6:5

David is praying for healing. He does not say "if You let me die, I will praise You from heaven." He says the opposite. The grave silences praise. If David had believed his soul would continue consciously praising God after death, the verse becomes meaningless. He could simply have said, "Whether You heal me or not, I shall praise You forever." He does not.

He continues elsewhere in the same key:

"The dead do not praise the LORD, nor any who go down into silence."

Psalm 115:17

Silence. Not praise. Not torment. Silence.

"His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish."

Psalm 146:4

In that very day. Not gradually, as a soul retires into another world. Not partially, as one diminishes from the earthly to the heavenly. The plans perish on the day of death. The thinking stops. The intending stops. The remembering stops.

Solomon, whose wisdom God Himself granted, writes in the same key.

"For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten."

Ecclesiastes 9:5

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going."

Ecclesiastes 9:10

These verses are not the words of a despairing skeptic. They are the inspired words of a wise king led by the Spirit of God to record what he had been given to see. The dead know nothing. There is no work, no device, no knowledge, no wisdom in the grave.

Job, in the midst of his anguish, paints the same picture:

"But man dies and is laid away; indeed he breathes his last and where is he?... So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep."

Job 14:10, 12

Hezekiah, lying upon what he thought was his deathbed, prays the same way:

*"For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You;
those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your truth.
The living, the living man, he shall praise You, as I do this
day." – Isaiah 38:18–19*

Read each of those texts again. Not as isolated verses to be debated, but as a single, unified Old Testament witness:

- The dead do not remember God (*Psalm 6:5*).
- The dead do not praise God (*Psalm 115:17*).
- The plans of the dead perish on the day of death (*Psalm 146:4*).
- The dead know nothing (*Ecclesiastes 9:5*).
- There is no work or device or knowledge in the grave (*Ecclesiastes 9:10*).
- The dead lie down and do not rise until the heavens are no more (*Job 14:12*).
- Sheol cannot thank God; death cannot praise Him (*Isaiah 38:18*).

This is not one verse from one corner of Scripture. It is the unified testimony of David, Solomon, Job, and Isaiah. Across centuries, across genres, across circumstances, the inspired writers say the same thing.

The dead sleep.

They are not present at our funerals.

They are not watching over our weddings.

They are not interceding before God in heaven.

They are waiting — held in the memory of God — until the trumpet sounds.

This is the Old Testament's quiet, repeated, undeniable witness.

PERSON BOX

HEZEKIAH: The King Who Wept

Hezekiah was a good king. The Bible says of him that *"he trusted in the LORD God of Israel; so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him"* (2 Kings 18:5). High praise — given even to David sparingly.

So when Hezekiah fell sick, and the prophet Isaiah came to tell him *"Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live"* (2 Kings 20:1), we might have expected this trusting king to receive the word peacefully. After all — if Hezekiah believed his soul would continue in conscious bliss with God the moment his body died, what was there to fear?

What did Hezekiah do?

"Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD... and Hezekiah wept bitterly" (2 Kings 20:2–3).

He wept.

This is not the response of a man who believed he was about to step gloriously into a more vivid form of life. This is the response of a man who believed death was the end of his conscious participation in God's purposes until the resurrection.

Listen to his prayer of recovery, recorded for us in Isaiah's gospel-like chapter 38:

◆ "For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your truth. The living, the living man, he shall praise You, as I do this day; the father shall make known Your truth to the children." – Isaiah

38:18–19 ◆

Read those words slowly. *Sheol cannot thank You. Death cannot praise You.* Hezekiah's understanding of death is unmistakable. The dead do not praise. The dead do not hope. The dead do not father children in the faith. The dead are not consciously communing with God in heaven.

It is "*the living, the living man,*" who praises God. The very repetition is a cry of relief. Hezekiah has been given back his living, his praising, his fathering. And he knows that had he died, none of that would have continued.

If anyone in the Old Testament believed that the dead are immediately and consciously with God, surely it would have been the most God-fearing king of Judah. And the most God-fearing king of Judah wept at the news of his death and praised God for his recovery — because he believed, on the testimony of Scripture itself, that the dead sleep until the trumpet.

His tears are part of the witness. ◆

The Language of Sleep

Both the Old and New Testaments frequently describe death as sleep.

When Lazarus died, Jesus told His disciples, "*Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up*" (John 11:11). The disciples misunderstood, thinking Jesus referred to natural sleep. John then explains plainly, "*Jesus spoke of his death*" (John 11:13).

Similarly, when Stephen was martyred, Scripture records that "he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60). Paul repeatedly uses the same expression when speaking of believers who have died (1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–16).

The comparison is meaningful. Sleep is temporary. It is followed by awakening. Likewise, death is repeatedly presented as awaiting the day when Christ will call the dead from their graves.

Daniel, given a glimpse of the resurrection day, writes in the same idiom:

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Daniel 12:2

Note the imagery. The dead are described as *sleeping in the dust of the earth*. Not soaring in heaven. Not suffering in flames. Sleeping in dust. And they shall *awake* — the verb of resurrection, not of pre-existing consciousness suddenly receiving a body.

Jesus uses the same language Himself:

"...the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth — those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." — John 5:28–29

All who are in the graves. Not all who are in heaven, or all who are in hell, or all whose disembodied souls are already enjoying or suffering their reward. *All who are in the graves*. The dead are in the graves until the voice of the Son of God calls them out.

This is the consistent testimony of Scripture from beginning to end.

PERSON BOX

JOB: The Voice from the Ash Heap

Job had lost everything. His children. His wealth. His health. His standing in the community. Even his wife told him to curse God and die. His friends sat with him in silence for seven days, then opened their mouths only to wound him further with theology that did not fit his life.

Out of that ash heap, out of that ruin, out of that sustained darkness — Job spoke one of the brightest sentences in the entire Old Testament.

"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" — Job 19:25–27

Notice the language carefully.

Job does not say, "I know that my soul shall fly to heaven." He says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth." Job's hope is not that he escapes the earth. His hope is that the Redeemer comes to the earth.

Job does not say, "My disembodied spirit shall behold God." He says, "In my flesh I shall see God." The word in Hebrew is *basar* — flesh, body, the material substance of his physical being. Job knows that after his skin is destroyed — after the corruption of the grave has done its work — he will see God in his flesh.

That is the language of bodily resurrection, not of escape from the body.

And notice when Job expects this to happen. Not at the moment of his death. Not in some intermediate paradise. "At last." At the end. When the Redeemer stands upon the earth.

Job, sitting on his ash heap in the most ancient book of the Bible, already knew what the Apostle Paul would later teach in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8 and 1 Thessalonians 4. The hope of the faithful is not the conscious survival of a disembodied soul. The hope of the faithful is the resurrection.

Job is therefore a witness across the ages. From the depths of his suffering, with no prior revelation of New Testament doctrine to lean upon, by the Spirit of God he saw what is hidden behind all our funerals: *I know that my Redeemer lives.*

In his flesh. At the last. On the earth.

That is the Christian hope. It always has been.

The Hope of Resurrection

No chapter in Scripture explains this more fully than 1 Corinthians 15. Paul builds his entire argument upon one central truth: if Christ has not been raised, then Christian faith is empty. He goes even further.

"For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." – 1 Corinthians 15:16–18

This statement deserves careful reflection. If believers already possessed complete, conscious, immortal life apart from the body, Paul's words would seem difficult to explain. Why would believers who had already entered heaven *perish* if there were no resurrection? They would already be enjoying their reward.

Instead, Paul presents the resurrection as absolutely essential. Without it, those who have died have truly perished. But because Christ has been raised, those who belong to Him also

have the sure hope of resurrection.

The victory is not death. The victory is Christ's triumph over death.

The Second Death

When we come to the closing chapters of Revelation, we encounter an expression found nowhere else in quite the same way. It is called **"the second death."**

John writes:

*"Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.
This is the second death."*

Revelation 20:14

Again, in the very next chapter we read that those whose names are not written in the Book of Life *"shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death"* (Revelation 21:8).

The expression itself is significant. The Bible does not call the Lake of Fire *"the second life."* Nor does it call it *"the second existence."* It calls it **the second death.**

The meaning of that expression lies at the heart of this entire discussion and will be examined in greater detail in later chapters. For now, it is enough to observe that the final judgment is consistently described using the language of death.

Does Death Mean Something Else?

Some theologians understand "death" in these passages to mean eternal separation from God while continuing in conscious existence. Others believe the word retains its ordinary meaning — the loss of life — unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.

Both views deserve careful consideration.

Our task throughout this booklet is not to dismiss either interpretation without examination but to ask which understanding best fits the total testimony of Scripture. This is especially important because the Bible repeatedly contrasts **death** with **life**, not merely with happiness or suffering.

The question is therefore not whether the final judgment is real. Scripture leaves no doubt that it is. The question is what God intends us to understand by the words He has chosen to describe it.

To answer that question, we must now examine another issue that has often been obscured by translation. When our English Bibles use the single word "*hell*," are they always referring to the same place? Or have several distinct biblical words been brought together under one English term?

The answer may surprise many readers.

SELFEXAM

What Have I Told Those Who Grieve?

"...that you sorrow not, even as others who have no hope."

1 Thessalonians 4:13

Paul did not write that we should not sorrow. He wrote that we should not sorrow as those who have no hope. There is honest grief in the Christian life, and it is given its hope by the resurrection.

What have I told myself, or told others, at the bedside or the graveside of those who have died? Has my comfort rested in the resurrection promised by Christ, or in some imagined immediate journey of the soul? What would it mean for my grief, and for the comfort I offer others, to plant my hope where the apostles planted theirs – at the sound of the trumpet?

CHAPTER FOUR

What Does the Bible Mean by "Hell"?



"Test all things; hold fast what is good."

1 Thessalonians 5:21

Few words in the English Bible have generated more misunderstanding than the word **hell**.

I grew up hearing and reading from Christian tracts that hell was a real place where real people burned forever. I never doubted that God would judge sin. But I quietly doubted, even as a child, that He would extend the process of judgment forever. I did not have the language for that doubt at the time. I only had the unease. The God I was learning to love in the gospel did not match the God I was being shown in the sermons about hell. I held the two together as best I could, telling myself that one day, when I was older, I would study it out.

What I eventually discovered, when I began that study, surprised me. It was not that hell was less than I had been taught. It was that the Bible was *more* than I had been taught. The Bible's original languages do **not** use just one word where English translations often use *hell*.

In the Old Testament, the primary word is **Sheol**.

In the New Testament, we encounter **Hades**, **Gehenna**, and **Tartarus**.

These are not identical terms. They have different origins, different meanings, and are used in different contexts. Recognizing these distinctions does not, by itself, settle the debate about final punishment. It does, however, prevent us from building doctrine upon an English word that sometimes represents several very different biblical ideas.

Let us consider each term in turn.

Sheol — The Grave or the Realm of the Dead

The Hebrew word **Sheol** appears more than sixty times in the Old Testament. Its exact meaning has been discussed by scholars for centuries, but one thing is clear: **Sheol is the destination of both the righteous and the wicked in the language of the Old Testament.**

Jacob expected to go to Sheol mourning for Joseph (Genesis 37:35). Job longed for God to hide him in Sheol until His wrath had passed (Job 14:13). David spoke of God delivering him from Sheol (Psalm 16:10). These faithful servants of God were certainly not expecting to enter a place of fiery punishment.

The clearest demonstration that *Sheol* means the grave comes from the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. When God judged them, He did not send them into a place of fire. Rather:

"...the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished

from among the assembly." — Numbers 16:31–33

The Hebrew word translated *the pit* in that passage is **Sheol**. They went down alive into Sheol. They were not consciously tormented in a fiery realm; they were buried under the earth. *Sheol* in its plainest Old Testament sense is the grave — the place where the dead are placed.

When Job, in his suffering, longed for Sheol, he was not longing for fiery torment. He was longing for the rest of the grave:

*"Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, that You would
conceal me until Your wrath is past, that You would
appoint me a set time, and remember me!"*

Job 14:13

Job views Sheol as a place where he might rest from God's wrath — until the appointed time when God remembers him. That is not the language of conscious torment. That is the language of waiting.

In many passages, Sheol simply refers to the grave, the realm of the dead, or the state of death itself. It is the place where earthly life comes to an end. For this reason, many modern Bible translations frequently render *Sheol* as "*the grave*," "*the realm of the dead*," or simply leave it untranslated.

Whatever nuances the word may carry in different passages, it is clear that *Sheol* is not identical with the popular picture of hell as a place of eternal fiery torment.

Hades — The New Testament Equivalent

The Greek word **Hades** generally corresponds to the Hebrew **Sheol**.

When Peter quotes Psalm 16 on the Day of Pentecost, the Hebrew word *Sheol* becomes the Greek word *Hades* (Acts 2:27, quoting Psalm 16:10). Peter is careful to explain what David meant:

"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.... He, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." –
Acts 2:29–31

Notice what Peter explicitly says. David is *dead and buried* – and his tomb is still present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. David has not gone consciously to heaven. He is in his tomb. The prophecy of Psalm 16 was not about David himself but about Christ's resurrection – Christ's soul was not abandoned in Hades; His flesh did not see corruption.

Peter could not have made his point more clearly if he had tried. David – *a man after God's own heart* – was in his grave, and would remain there until the resurrection. The verse he had written about not being left in *Sheol* pointed forward to Christ.

Like *Sheol*, *Hades* often refers to the realm of the dead. Jesus declared that the gates of *Hades* would not prevail against His church (Matthew 16:18). The Book of Revelation even personifies Death and *Hades* before declaring:

"Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire."

Revelation 20:14

This statement deserves careful attention. If *Hades* itself is ultimately thrown into the Lake of Fire, then *Hades* cannot

simply be another name for the final Lake of Fire. The two are distinguished. Hades is temporary. The Lake of Fire belongs to the final judgment.

This distinction is frequently overlooked when every occurrence of *hell* is assumed to refer to the same reality. And Hosea sees Hades' end with prophetic eyes:

*"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will
redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues!
O Grave, I will be your destruction!"*

Hosea 13:14

Paul quotes this very verse triumphantly in 1 Corinthians 15:55 in his great resurrection chapter. The grave is not God's final answer. The resurrection is.

Gehenna — The Valley That Became a Warning

The word **Gehenna** is perhaps the most significant term in this discussion because it is the word Jesus most often used when warning about final judgment.

Gehenna comes from the Hebrew expression **Ge Hinnom**, meaning "*the Valley of Hinnom*." This valley lay just outside Jerusalem.

Its history was tragic. In the days of the kings of Judah, it became associated with idolatry and the horrific practice of child sacrifice (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:31–32). Because of these abominations, the prophets declared that it would become a place of judgment. By the time of Jesus, Gehenna had become a powerful symbol of divine condemnation.

Many teachers have described it as a valley associated with refuse, decay, burning waste, and worms consuming dead

matter. While aspects of this description have been repeated for generations, historians debate exactly how Gehenna functioned in the first century. The biblical point does not depend upon every detail of the valley's later history. What is beyond dispute is that Jesus deliberately used a place already known to His audience as a symbol of God's coming judgment.

When Jesus warned, *"...rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"* (Matthew 10:28), the word translated *hell* in that verse is Gehenna. His hearers immediately understood the seriousness of His words.

Notice something important. Jesus says God is able to **destroy** both body and soul. The Greek verb translated *destroy* (*apollymi*) is used throughout the New Testament in contexts involving destruction, loss, or ruin. Exactly how it should be understood here is one of the central questions this booklet seeks to examine.

"Where Their Worm Does Not Die"

One of the most frequently quoted sayings of Jesus is found in Mark 9:48: *"...where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."*

These words are often understood as proof of endless conscious torment. However, Jesus is quoting almost verbatim from the closing verse of the book of Isaiah:

"And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

Isaiah 66:24

Notice the imagery. Isaiah describes **corpses**, not living people enduring conscious suffering. The worms feed upon the dead bodies. The fire is not quenched until it has completely consumed what has been judged. The emphasis is on the certainty and completeness of God's judgment rather than on keeping people alive forever in order to torment them.

This understanding fits the Old Testament background from which Jesus drew His language. Whether one ultimately accepts this interpretation or not, it is essential to recognize that Jesus was quoting Isaiah, and His words should first be understood in that prophetic context.

Tartarus — A Place for Fallen Angels

The final term translated as *hell* appears only once in the New Testament. Peter writes that God "*cast them down to Tartarus*" (2 Peter 2:4, using a Greek verb derived from *Tartarus*) in reference to angels who sinned.

Unlike Sheol, Hades, or Gehenna, this passage does **not** concern human beings. It refers specifically to fallen angels being kept under restraint until the day of judgment.

This distinction is important because Tartarus should not be confused with either the grave or the Lake of Fire. Each term has its own context.

Why These Distinctions Matter

Once these words are carefully distinguished, several observations emerge.

The Old Testament does not use Sheol as the final place of fiery punishment.

Hades is not identical to the Lake of Fire, since it is itself cast into the Lake of Fire.

Tartarus concerns rebellious angels rather than mankind.

Gehenna is the primary image Jesus employs for final judgment, drawing upon the historical and prophetic significance of the Valley of Hinnom.

Recognizing these distinctions does not answer every question. It does, however, remind us that doctrine should be built upon the meanings of the biblical words themselves rather than upon later assumptions attached to a single English translation.

Having clarified the language, we are now prepared to examine the passages most often cited in support of eternal conscious torment. Do they, when read in their literary, historical, and biblical context, teach unending conscious suffering? Or do they point to the certainty, severity, and finality of God's judgment upon sin?

That is the question to which we now turn.

Do Jesus' Words Teach Eternal Conscious Torment?



"The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life."

John 6:63

No one spoke more often about judgment than Jesus Christ.

This fact deserves to be acknowledged at the outset. Any interpretation of the final judgment that minimizes Christ's warnings cannot claim to represent the whole counsel of God. Jesus repeatedly urged His hearers to repent, warned of a coming judgment, and described consequences so severe that no reasonable person should treat them lightly.

The question before us, therefore, is not **whether** Jesus taught judgment. He certainly did. The question is **how** His warnings should be understood. Did Jesus teach that the wicked will remain consciously alive forever in endless torment? Or did He employ vivid prophetic language, familiar to His Jewish audience, to describe the certainty and finality of God's judgment?

To answer these questions fairly, we must examine His words in their original biblical setting.

Better to Enter Life Than Be Cast into Gehenna

Jesus declared:

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched."

Mark 9:43

Similar statements are made concerning the foot and the eye (Mark 9:45–47). These sayings are among the strongest warnings in the Gospels.

It is immediately evident that Jesus is using deliberate hyperbole. He is not commanding self-mutilation, for elsewhere He teaches that sin proceeds from the heart (Mark 7:20–23), not merely from the members of the body. His point is unmistakable. Nothing is worth losing the Kingdom of God. Whatever must be surrendered to avoid God's judgment is worth surrendering.

The seriousness of the warning is beyond dispute. The question is how to understand the expressions "*unquenchable fire*" and "*where their worm does not die.*"

As we observed in the previous chapter, these words come directly from Isaiah 66:24, where the prophet describes the **corpses** of those who have rebelled against God. The fire is *unquenchable* not because it burns forever without accomplishing its purpose, but because no one can extinguish it before it has completely consumed what God has appointed for judgment.

The Old Testament uses similar language elsewhere. Jeremiah warned Jerusalem that God would kindle an unquenchable fire

in its gates (Jeremiah 17:27). That fire did not burn throughout all eternity. It burned until Jerusalem's destruction had been accomplished. It was *unquenchable* because no human power could prevent God's judgment.

This Old Testament background is essential for understanding Jesus' language.

"Destroy Both Soul and Body"

Among Christ's clearest statements on final judgment is Matthew 10:28:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

This verse deserves careful attention because it is often cited by both sides of the discussion.

Those who believe in eternal conscious torment argue that *destroy* means everlasting ruin rather than the cessation of life. Those who hold to conditional immortality understand *destroy* in its more ordinary sense of bringing to an end.

The Greek word translated *destroy* is *apollymi*. Like many biblical words, it has a range of meanings depending on context. It can describe something lost, ruined, destroyed, or brought to its end. The context must determine the precise nuance.

Whatever interpretation one adopts, one observation is difficult to overlook. Jesus does not say that God will preserve both soul and body forever in Gehenna. He says that God is able to **destroy** both. The burden of interpretation therefore lies in explaining what Jesus intended by that word.

PERSON BOX

LAZARUS OF BETHANY: *Four Days in the Tomb*

His name was Lazarus, though we must not confuse him with the beggar in Jesus' parable. This Lazarus was a real man — the brother of Mary and Martha, dear enough to Jesus that John records simply: *"Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus"* (John 11:5).

He fell sick. The sisters sent word to Jesus. *"Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick"* (John 11:3). Jesus delayed deliberately. By the time He arrived, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days.

Listen carefully to what Jesus said to His disciples on the way:

"Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."

John 11:11

The disciples misunderstood. They thought He meant ordinary sleep. So John writes plainly:

"However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'" — John 11:13–14

Jesus called death *sleep*. John tells us what the disciples missed, so we will not miss it. *Lazarus is dead. Lazarus sleeps.* The two statements are not contradictions. They are the same statement.

When Jesus arrived at the tomb, Martha said something quietly remarkable: *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"* (John 11:24). She did not say, *"I know that he is now consciously with You in heaven."* She did not say, *"I know that his soul is already at peace."* She said *the resurrection at the last day*. That was the first-century Jewish hope. That is the biblical hope.

Then Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. *"Lazarus, come forth!"* The dead man came out.

Now consider this. Lazarus lived for years afterwards. He had stories he could have told. He had four whole days of being dead, longer than even Jonah was in the great fish. If during those four days his disembodied soul had been consciously enjoying paradise, or witnessing the unseen world, or communing with departed saints — would he not have told us? Would John not have recorded it? Would the early church not have treasured every word of his testimony?

Yet not one word from Lazarus about those four days appears anywhere in Scripture.

Why?

Because there was nothing to report. Lazarus was sleeping. His friend Jesus called him back, and he came forth. The interval was as silent as it was for any of us when we sleep through the night.

The silence of Lazarus is one of the most overlooked testimonies in the New Testament. He had been where every Christian wonders about. And he had nothing to say — because the dead know nothing, just as Solomon said.

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Several of Jesus' parables speak of people being cast into "outer darkness," where there is "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (for example, Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 25:30).

These expressions have often been understood as descriptions of eternal conscious suffering. Yet we should first ask how these phrases function elsewhere in Scripture.

Weeping naturally expresses grief, sorrow, and regret. *Gnashing of teeth* frequently signifies rage, anguish, or bitter hostility. The Psalmist speaks of the wicked *gnashing his teeth*

against the righteous (Psalm 37:12), and Acts records that those who heard Stephen's testimony *gnashed at him with their teeth* in fury (Acts 7:54). The phrase is not the language of endless torment; it is the language of fierce anguish.

Neither expression, by itself, tells us how long the experience lasts. They vividly portray the horror of facing God's judgment and the devastating realization of what has been lost. Whether that judgment culminates in everlasting conscious torment or in irreversible destruction is a question that must be answered from the broader testimony of Scripture rather than from these expressions alone.

The Narrow Gate and the Broad Way

Jesus also contrasts two destinies:

"Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it... broad is the way that leads to destruction..." – Matthew 7:13-14

Once again, notice the contrast. Life. Destruction. The Greek word translated *destruction* is again related to *apollymi*. Jesus does not contrast everlasting happiness with everlasting misery. He contrasts life with destruction.

The same pattern appears elsewhere in His teaching:

"My sheep hear My voice... and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish." – John 10:27-28

To *perish*. To be *destroyed*. These are the contrasts Jesus drew. And His parables echo the same imagery. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the tares are *burned up* – the Greek word is *katakaiō*, meaning to consume completely (Matthew 13:30, 40). The tares are not preserved in flames. They are reduced to ash.

When Jesus spoke of the judgment to come in the days of the Son of Man, He compared it to two events from Israel's memory:

"...it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all."

Luke 17:29

The flood destroyed them. The fire on Sodom destroyed them. Jesus' chosen analogies for the final judgment were events of *destruction* — events whose victims were ended, not preserved in conscious suffering for the rest of history.

This observation does not settle the debate by itself, but it contributes to an emerging pattern that deserves thoughtful consideration.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

No passage has been discussed more frequently in this subject than Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31).

Because this passage plays such an important role in the discussion — and because so much weight is placed on it by readers who hold the traditional view — it deserves a chapter of its own.

But before we examine it, we must first address several other passages that are often raised against the position this booklet is presenting. A reader from the traditional view will, at this point, be holding several verses in mind that have not yet been addressed: Moses and Elijah appearing at the Transfiguration, the souls under the altar in Revelation, the thief on the cross, and Paul's longing to be with Christ.

These are not minor texts. They are the texts that have led many sincere Christians to believe the dead are consciously aware between death and the resurrection. They deserve careful, respectful, biblical engagement.

That engagement is the work of the chapter that follows.

What of the Texts That Seem to Speak of Going to Be with the Lord at Death?



"Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths." — Proverbs 4:10–11

Any honest treatment of the questions raised by this booklet must engage the passages from which most Christians draw their belief that the dead are immediately conscious in the presence of God. To pass over them would be a kind of evasion that the seriousness of the subject does not allow.

Several passages, taken at first glance, appear to suggest that the dead — at least the righteous dead — are immediately aware in the presence of God. They are worth listing plainly before we examine them:

- Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–13).
- The souls under the altar crying out in Revelation 6:9–11.
- Jesus' word to the thief on the cross: *"today you will be with Me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43).

- Paul's longing to *"depart and be with Christ, which is far better"* (Philippians 1:23).
- Paul's confidence that he would be *"absent from the body, present with the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 5:8).

If these passages do indeed teach that the dead go immediately to be with the Lord, then the case for conditional immortality collapses, and the abundant Old Testament witness we examined in Chapter Three must be reread very differently.

But if they admit of other faithful interpretations — interpretations that fit the wider testimony of Scripture — then they need not overturn what the rest of the Bible has told us.

Let us look at each in turn.

Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration

The Transfiguration is a glorious event. Peter, James, and John see Jesus shining with the glory of God. Beside Him stand Moses and Elijah — figures from Israel's past — speaking with Him about *"His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:31).

For many readers, this account settles the question. Moses had died and been buried fifteen hundred years earlier. Yet there he was, conscious and conversing. Does this not prove that the righteous dead are conscious in the presence of God?

A closer look invites caution.

First, the Transfiguration is explicitly described by Jesus Himself as a **vision**. Matthew records His instruction to the disciples on the way down:

*"Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen
from the dead."*

Matthew 17:9

The Greek word is *horama* — a vision, a sight given, an unveiling. Jesus does not call it a meeting; He calls it a vision. This does not make it unreal. Visions in Scripture are real revelations. But visions communicate truth through given imagery. The cloud, the voice, the appearance of figures from the past — all are part of what God showed the three disciples. They saw Moses and Elijah, but the seeing was a vision granted by God — not the descent of two conscious spirits from heaven, sent to speak with Jesus on the mountain the way angels at God's bidding have at times appeared to men on earth.

Second, the common assumption that Elijah was taken straight to heaven where God dwells — and has been with God ever since — deserves a closer look. The Bible says he was taken up by a whirlwind, with a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). It nowhere says he was carried into the throne room of God. Indeed, Jesus Himself declared, *"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven"* (John 3:13). If Elijah had bypassed death and been carried into the very presence of God, Jesus's words would have to be qualified. They are not. Elijah was taken from the company of Elisha and the sons of the prophets, carried by the whirlwind into the *heavens* in the more ordinary biblical sense of the visible sky, and relocated to live out the remainder of his natural life away from public ministry. The mantle of the public prophet now passed to Elisha.

Scripture quietly confirms this. Some years after the ascension recorded in 2 Kings 2 — years into the reign of Jehoram of Judah, who began to reign well after Elijah was taken — *a writing from Elijah the prophet* reached the king's hand (2 Chronicles 21:12). The letter was current. It addressed a specific king's specific sins. Its messenger knew where to find the prophet. Elijah was still alive somewhere on the earth, ministering by correspondence in the closing years of his natural life.

He died eventually, as all men die. He took his place among the great cloud of witnesses described in Hebrews 11 — *"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth"* (Hebrews 11:13). Elijah's appearance at the Transfiguration therefore raises the same question as Moses's: how can two long-dead servants of God be seen with the Messiah, unless the dead are already in heaven with God and able to appear to the living when He permits it — and if so, what becomes of the abundant weight of scripture we have already walked through, which tells us that the dead know nothing, that their thoughts perish the day they die, that they neither praise God nor remember Him until the resurrection?

Third, Moses' body was the subject of a contention between Michael the archangel and Satan (Jude 9). The text does not explain the contention, but it is suggestive: Moses' body, alone of all the dead in Israel, received special handling from God Himself. The Lord buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5–6), and no man knew the place of his sepulchre.

Could the God who took Elijah away from his surroundings to live out his remaining days in seclusion, and who buried Moses

Himself, bring both — long since gathered to their fathers — into a vision of the living Messiah at His approach to death? Could that vision be a foreshadowing of a future reality, when both Moses and Elijah shall stand resurrected with their Lord in the kingdom they died believing? The text does not require an answer. It does not require us to claim that Moses and Elijah were consciously present in the moment. It requires only that we let Jesus call the event what He Himself calls it: *a vision*. Drawing a general doctrine that the dead are awake and conscious from a vision Jesus calls "*a vision*" is to claim more than the text gives.

PERSON BOX

ELIJAH: The Prophet Who Sent a Letter from "Heaven"

Elijah's public ministry took place during the reigns of two kings of the northern kingdom of Israel — Ahab, who reigned about 874–853 BC, and his son Ahaziah, who reigned about 853–852 BC. It was during these reigns that Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, ran in the strength of God to Horeb, raised the widow's son at Zarephath, and pronounced judgment on the house of Ahab. His final public confrontation, recorded in 2 Kings 1, was with the dying Ahaziah over the king's consultation of Baal-Zebub of Ekron.

Soon afterward, Elijah was taken up by the whirlwind, with the chariot of fire — in the early days of Joram of Israel, Ahaziah's brother, around 852 BC. The popular reading holds that he was carried at that moment into the throne room of God and has been consciously there ever since. The Bible itself quietly tells a different story.

Several years after the ascension by whirlwind, during the reign of Jehoram of Judah — a different king from Joram of Israel, though they reigned in the same period; Jehoram of Judah reigned about 848–841 BC — a letter was delivered to the king. *"And a writing came to him from Elijah the prophet, saying, Thus says the LORD God of David your father..."* (2 Chronicles 21:12). The letter named Jehoram's specific sins — his marriage into the wicked house of Ahab, his murder of his own brothers — and pronounced specific judgment for them.

This was not an old prophecy archived years before and delivered posthumously. It addressed a current situation. It named recent deeds. It implied a messenger who knew where to find the prophet. It implied a prophet still informed about the affairs of the kingdoms.

Several years after his "ascension," then, Elijah was still alive on the earth.

The whirlwind, then, was not the gate of heaven. It was the means by which God removed His prophet from public ministry, transferring the mantle of public office to Elisha and relocating Elijah himself to live the closing years of his natural life in seclusion. He died, as all faithful men die. He took his place among the cloud of witnesses described in Hebrews 11 — *"These all died in faith, not having received the promises..."* (Hebrews 11:13).

The closing word belongs to Jesus. *"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven"* (John 3:13). If Elijah had been with God in the throne room for the eight hundred and fifty years between his ascension and the day Jesus spoke those words, Jesus would have had to qualify them. He did not. Jesus does not speak falsely.

Elijah is not in heaven. He sleeps, as all the dead in faith sleep, awaiting the same resurrection promised to every saint.

The Souls Under the Altar

In Revelation 6:9–11, John sees a vivid scene:

"I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed."

The souls of the martyrs cry out. They are given white robes. They are told to rest. Does this not prove conscious life between death and the resurrection?

Once again, context is essential. Revelation is the most explicitly symbolic book in the Bible. From the opening verse, the angel signifies the message to John through *signs* (Revelation 1:1). Throughout the book we encounter:

- A woman clothed with the sun (Revelation 12:1).
- A great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns (Revelation 12:3).
- A beast rising out of the sea (Revelation 13:1).
- A great harlot sitting on many waters (Revelation 17:1).
- An angel with one foot on the sea and one on the land (Revelation 10:2).

No serious interpreter takes every one of these images as literal description. The dragon is not a literal seven-headed lizard; it is Satan. The harlot is not a literal woman; she is a system of government and power represented by a city (ancient Babylon). The woman clothed with the sun is not a literal woman; she is the people of God.

It would be inconsistent to read every other symbol as symbol while reading *only* the souls under the altar as literal description of a present state.

What is the symbol *saying*? It is saying what the Old Testament already said about the blood of the righteous. The blood of Abel "*cries from the ground*" to God (Genesis 4:10). Abel is not conscious in the ground. His blood is not literally speaking. The image is a metaphor of moral testimony — the blood of the

innocent cries to heaven for justice.

The souls under the altar are the same image. The martyrs have been slain. Their blood cries to God. In the heavenly vision John is given, this cry is rendered as souls beneath the altar crying "How long?" — the perennial prayer of the persecuted righteous (compare Psalm 13:1; 79:5; 94:3). The symbol communicates a truth: God hears the blood of His saints, and the justice they cry for is on its way.

To draw from this image a doctrine that the dead are awake and already with God before the resurrection is to take a symbol literally that the book itself is signalling as symbolic.

Paul's "Far Better" and "Present with the Lord"

Paul writes to the Philippians:

"For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."

Philippians 1:23

And to the Corinthians:

"We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."

2 Corinthians 5:8

These verses are precious to many Christians at funerals — and rightly so. But do they teach that the moment Paul died his disembodied soul went immediately into Christ's conscious presence?

We must read Paul as a whole. The same Paul, writing to the same Corinthians a few chapters earlier, locates the hope of being with Christ at the resurrection:

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." – 1 Corinthians 15:52–53

And to the Thessalonians, when comforting them about deceased believers, Paul does not say, "Do not grieve, for they are already with Christ." He says:

"The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord." – 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

When does "always with the Lord" begin? At the descent, at the trumpet, at the rising of the dead in Christ. That is when believers are caught up to be with Him.

DOCTRINAL NOTE

Always With the Lord: Where Does the Reunion Happen?

When Paul writes that the redeemed *"shall always be with the Lord"* (1 Thessalonians 4:17), we must read his words alongside the rest of Scripture rather than assuming they describe an upward journey to heaven from which the saints never return.

When Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives, the angels told the watching disciples, *"This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven"* (Acts 1:11). He left from the Mount of Olives; He will return to the Mount of Olives. The prophet Zechariah saw the same moment: *"And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east"* (Zechariah 14:4).

Jude, citing Enoch, adds, *"Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints"* (Jude 14). The Lord returns with His saints — not away from the earth, but to it. Read alongside 1 Thessalonians 4, the picture becomes clear. At the trumpet, the dead in Christ rise first. Then the living are caught up to meet the returning Lord in the air. Together with Him, they descend to the earth He has come to claim.

The Greek word translated *"meet"* in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is *apantēsis*. In Greek usage it was a near-technical term for the delegation that went out from a city to greet an approaching dignitary — not to escort him away to somewhere else, but to welcome him on his road and accompany him into the city he was coming to. Luke uses the same word in Acts 28:15, where the Roman brethren came out from the city to *meet* Paul on the Appian Way and then escorted him back to Rome. The believers in 1 Thessalonians 4 are not going up to stay. They are going up to *welcome Him on His way down*.

This is the moment Zechariah saw. This is the moment Acts 1:11 promised. This is what Revelation 20 describes as the beginning of the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth — and that reign is the opening chapter of the everlasting Kingdom of God established upon the renewed earth (Revelation 11:15; Revelation 21:1–3).

So *"always with the Lord"* means exactly that. We shall always be with Him. But the geography of *with* is not what the older imagery of "going to heaven" so often suggested. The geography of *with* is the earth restored, the Mount of Olives received, the Kingdom established, and the redeemed reigning with their Lord — first for a thousand years, and then forever.

This is the very Kingdom Daniel saw in vision long ago — *a stone cut without human hands*, which struck the great image of human empire, broke it to dust, and became a mountain that filled the whole earth (Daniel 2:34–35, 44–45). The God of heaven sets up a Kingdom that shall never be destroyed, and it stands forever — here, on the earth He made and is restoring.

What, then, does Paul mean by *"absent from the body, present with the Lord"*?

Paul, like every faithful believer, perceived time from the standpoint of consciousness. From the standpoint of the one who dies, there is no perceived interval between closing one's eyes in death and opening them at the resurrection. The grave is silent. The dead know nothing. The next conscious moment for the believer who dies today is the trumpet of God.

In that experiential sense, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. The eye closes here; it opens there. For the one who sleeps in Jesus, no time passes. The departure and the arrival are felt as one. This is not a denial of Paul; it is an

honest reading of Paul that lets all his words stand together.

When Paul says "*to depart and be with Christ is far better*," he is speaking of the believer's hope. He is not constructing a chronology. He is describing the goal. The next thing the dying believer knows is the face of Christ. Whether five minutes or five thousand years separate the moment of death and the moment of resurrection makes no difference to the experience of the one who sleeps. There is no experienced gap.

This understanding harmonizes Paul with Paul, and Paul with Job and David and Solomon and Isaiah and Jesus. The dead sleep. The next conscious moment for the faithful is the resurrection. From their experience, departure and presence with the Lord are one event.

The Thief on the Cross

The strongest single verse for the traditional view is found in Luke 23:43.

A thief, crucified beside Jesus, turns to Him in faith. He says, "*Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom*" (Luke 23:42). Jesus answers:

*"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in
Paradise."*

Luke 23:43

For many Christians, this verse settles everything. The thief was about to die. Jesus told him that *today* — that very day — he would be with Him in Paradise. Does this not prove that the dead are immediately conscious in the presence of God?

PERSON BOX

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS: A Comma and a Promise

We know almost nothing about him. We do not know his name, his upbringing, his family, his crime. We know only this: he was being executed beside Jesus of Nazareth, on a Wednesday afternoon — Passover day, the preparation day before the High Sabbath of the First Day of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6–7; John 19:31) — outside the walls of Jerusalem, in the most public death the Romans could devise. (That Wednesday afternoon is the day required by Jesus's own sign of *"three days and three nights"* in the heart of the earth — Matthew 12:40 — and by Daniel's prophecy that Messiah would be cut off in the middle of the week — Daniel 9:27.)

He had reviled Jesus at first, along with the other criminal (Matthew 27:44). But somewhere in those hours — perhaps as he watched Jesus, perhaps as he heard the prayer *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"* (Luke 23:34) — something in him broke open. By the time we hear his voice in Luke 23, he is no longer reviling. He is rebuking his fellow criminal: *"Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong"* (Luke 23:40–41).

Then he turned his head — as best he could on the wood — toward Jesus, and said,

"Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."

Luke 23:42

It is one of the most extraordinary acts of faith in all of Scripture. A dying man asks to be remembered by another dying man. He has no theological framework. He has no church. He has no time left. He has only this: the conviction that this Man is who He claims to be, and the hope that this Man's kingdom is real.

Jesus' reply has been the foundation of much comfort and much argument:

"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:43

For many readers, this verse is the clearest proof that the righteous dead are immediately, consciously, with Christ.

But notice something. The original Greek manuscripts had no punctuation. Not in 1 Corinthians 15. Not in Romans 6. Not in Luke 23. The commas and full stops in our modern Bibles were inserted by translators centuries later. They are interpretive choices, not part of the inspired text.

Where, then, should the comma in Luke 23:43 go?

The traditional English placement reads: *"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."*

But the Greek sentence equally allows: *"Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise."*

This is not a desperate evasion. It is a grammatically natural reading, and *"Assuredly, I say to you today..."* is a common emphatic formula in Hebrew and Aramaic speech. The speaker is solemnly affirming on the day in question — today, this day, in this hour — what will surely come to pass at the appointed time.

Which placement is correct?

Consider the other words of Jesus that bear on the question. Early on Sunday morning — after the Resurrection had already taken place at the close of the previous Sabbath — Jesus encountered Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She tried to embrace Him. He said,

"Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father."

John 20:17

◆ If, on Wednesday afternoon — Passover day, the preparation day before the High Sabbath of the First Day of Unleavened Bread, which John specifically notes was "*a high day*" (John 19:31; Leviticus 23:6–7) — Jesus and the thief had together gone to Paradise, to the conscious presence of the Father, what does Jesus mean on Sunday morning when He says *I have not yet ascended to My Father*?

The two verses do not fit each other on the traditional reading. They fit perfectly on the alternative reading. Jesus said to the thief, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." The promise is firm. The placement is at the resurrection. The thief, sleeping in death until the appointed day, will indeed be with Jesus in the restored Paradise that the Bible promises. *Today*, says Jesus on the cross — *on this day of my agony and my victory — I am giving you that promise.*

The thief sleeps. He has slept now for two thousand years. He will sleep until the day God appoints for his resurrection — a day of which Scripture says more than can be unfolded within the pages of this book, but a day that is beautiful, and full of hope, for him and for many like him. And on that day his eyes will open, and the first face he sees will be the face of the Man who hung beside him.

That is the Christian hope. That is what was promised. And it is no less wonderful for being placed where the rest of Scripture places it. ◆

DOCTRINAL NOTE

Three Days and Three Nights: The Only Sign He Gave

When the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, He gave them only one. *"For 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"* (Matthew 12:40).

The sign is precise. Not three days. Not portions of three days. Not three days and two nights. *Three days and three nights.*

This is the single criterion by which any reading of the crucifixion chronology must be measured. If a reading cannot account for three full days and three full nights between burial and resurrection, then by Jesus's own word, the sign He gave has not been fulfilled.

The traditional Friday-to-Sunday-morning reading does not fit. From Friday late afternoon — when the body was laid in the tomb — to early Sunday morning — when the women found the tomb empty — yields at most one full day (Saturday) and two nights (Friday and Saturday). That is one day and two nights, not three of each.

The Wednesday-afternoon reading fits exactly. The Hebrew day begins at sunset. From Wednesday sunset to Saturday sunset is precisely three days and three nights:

- Wednesday sunset to Thursday sunset — Night 1, Day 1.
- Thursday sunset to Friday sunset — Night 2, Day 2.
- Friday sunset to Saturday sunset — Night 3, Day 3.

The Lord rose at the close of the weekly Sabbath, just as the first day of the week was beginning. By the time the women arrived at the tomb at dawn on Sunday, the resurrection had already taken place. *"He is not here, for He is risen,"* the angel said (Matthew 28:6).

..

Daniel saw this chronology in vision long before it occurred. He prophesied that the Messiah would be "cut off" and would "bring an end to sacrifice and offering" in "the middle of the week" (Daniel 9:26-27). Wednesday is the middle of the seven-day week. Wednesday is the day on which the Lamb of God was crucified, bringing the sacrificial system to its appointed end. John adds the quiet confirmation. He notes that the Sabbath which followed the crucifixion was "a high day" (John 19:31) — by which he means it was not the weekly Sabbath but the First Day of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:6-7), an annual Sabbath which falls on whatever day of the week the calendar appoints. In the year of the crucifixion, the First Day of Unleavened Bread fell on a Thursday. The preparation day before it was Wednesday. The weekly Sabbath that followed was Saturday. Between them lay the three days and three nights of the Messiah's sign — fulfilled exactly as He had said.

..

The Pattern That Emerges

When we consider these passages together — the Transfiguration vision, the symbolic souls under the altar, the experiential immediacy of departure and presence with the Lord, the placement of the comma in Luke 23:43 — a consistent picture emerges. None of these texts requires us to abandon the abundant Old Testament witness that the dead sleep until the resurrection.

Each of them admits a faithful reading that harmonizes with the rest of Scripture. The reader who chooses such readings is not evading the texts. He is asking that they be read alongside Job 14, Ecclesiastes 9, Psalm 6, Psalm 115, Psalm 146, Isaiah 38, John 5:28, Daniel 12, and 1 Thessalonians 4 — and not against

them.

The clearer passages of Scripture interpret the more difficult. The whole counsel of God carries greater weight than any single verse.

This principle prepares us to examine, in the next chapter, the single passage that has done more to shape the popular picture of life after death than any other: the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

SELFEXAM

What Will I Do When the Texts Are Hard?

"...received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

Acts 17:11

The Bereans did not begin with their conclusion and then search for proof. They received the word, and then they searched the Scriptures to see whether the word held. That is the noble path.

When a passage of Scripture appears to challenge what I have been taught, do I default to the teaching, or do I default to the text? Am I willing to sit with the difficulty long enough for the whole counsel of God to speak? What might I discover if I held my conclusions a little more loosely and the words of God a little more closely?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Rich Man and Lazarus — History or Parable?



"Then He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts....'"

Luke 16:15

A friend of mine told me, with complete sincerity, that her departed mother had been seen in the marketplace two weeks after the burial. The driver who had served her family for many years met her there. He greeted her — and she scolded him, asking why he was allowing her *aged mother* to walk to the market alone.

My friend was comforted. *Mama*, she said, *had come back one last time before retiring to heaven*. She believed her mother was now safely in glory — but had paused, just before going, to look out for the daughter she had loved on earth.

I did not contradict her. The wound was too recent.

But I have thought about that story for many years. Because if our culture's deep instinct is correct — if the dead are consciously aware, mobile, capable of visiting the living, advocating for them, interceding for them — then the Bible's repeated insistence that the dead *sleep* until the resurrection

becomes a hard saying we have all quietly set aside.

And if there is one passage in all of Scripture that seems to support our cultural instinct, it is the story Jesus tells in Luke 16:19–31.

A rich man dies. A poor man dies. The rich man is in torment. The poor man is in Abraham's bosom. They see each other across a great gulf. They speak.

For many Christians, this passage settles the matter. If Jesus described such events, surely this must be a literal picture of what happens immediately after death.

Others, however, understand the account differently. They see it as a parable — one of several spoken in succession — using familiar Jewish imagery to rebuke the religious leaders and expose the danger of unbelief.

The question is not whether the account is true. Jesus never spoke falsely. The question is **how He intended His hearers to understand it**. Did He mean to reveal the geography of the afterlife, or was He using a powerful story to communicate spiritual truth?

Before drawing conclusions, we must first examine the context.

The Setting

Luke does not place this account in isolation. It follows a series of parables and teachings directed largely at the Pharisees.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. In Luke 16, He tells the parable of the dishonest steward. Immediately afterward, Luke tells us:

"Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him."

Luke 16:14

Jesus then rebukes them for justifying themselves before men while their hearts remained far from God. Only after this confrontation does He begin the account of the rich man and Lazarus.

This context is significant. The story is addressed to religious leaders who trusted in their status, wealth, and outward righteousness while rejecting God's Messiah.

The Language of Parable

Although Luke does not explicitly introduce this account with the words *"He spoke a parable,"* neither does he always use that formula for every parabolic saying. The account possesses many features commonly found in Jesus' parables. It presents sharply contrasting characters. It contains dramatic reversals. It concludes with a moral lesson directed toward His audience.

Most importantly, its climax is not the condition of the dead but the refusal of people to believe God's Word even when confronted with overwhelming evidence. Abraham declares:

"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

Luke 16:31

Those words point directly beyond the story itself. Ironically, Jesus would soon raise another man named Lazarus from the dead (John 11), yet many of the religious leaders still refused to believe. Ultimately, even Christ's own resurrection did not persuade those whose hearts were already hardened.

The emphasis of the story therefore falls upon unbelief rather than upon constructing a detailed map of what happens between death and the resurrection.

Difficulties with a Literal Reading

Suppose, for a moment, that the account is intended as a literal description. Several questions immediately arise.

Is Abraham's bosom a literal location where the righteous are gathered?

Can those in bliss and those in torment carry on conversations across a great gulf?

Does a single drop of water upon a fingertip relieve the suffering of someone engulfed in flames?

Do departed spirits possess tongues, fingers, and eyes before the resurrection of the body?

If the righteous and the wicked are already enjoying their final destinies immediately after death, what purpose does the future resurrection and final judgment serve?

These questions do not prove that the account is a parable. They simply remind us that a strictly literal reading raises interpretive difficulties of its own.

Familiar Imagery

Many scholars have observed that stories involving conversations between the dead were known within certain strands of Jewish literature before the time of Christ. Jesus often drew upon familiar imagery understood by His audience without endorsing every detail of the imagery itself.

For example, His parables include talking trees (compare Judges 9:8–15, where Jotham tells just such a parable), unjust judges, dishonest stewards, and dramatic fictional settings. No one imagines that every feature of these stories is intended to establish doctrine.

The point of a parable lies in its message. The imagery serves the lesson.

Likewise, if Jesus employs imagery familiar to His hearers in Luke 16, the question becomes: **What lesson is He teaching?**

The Great Reversal

Throughout Luke's Gospel, one theme appears repeatedly.

God exalts the humble. He brings down the proud. The hungry are filled. The self-satisfied are sent away empty (Luke 1:52–53). The rich fool loses everything (Luke 12:16–21). The Pharisee is humbled while the tax collector is justified (Luke 18:9–14).

The rich man and Lazarus fit perfectly within this pattern. The rich man's wealth did not condemn him. His hardened heart did. Lazarus' poverty did not save him. His trust in God did.

Jesus overturns the assumptions of those who believed that wealth automatically signified God's approval. The reversal is moral and spiritual.

"They Have Moses and the Prophets"

The climax of the account comes in Abraham's final words:

"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them."

Luke 16:29

When the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent back from the dead to warn his brothers, Abraham refuses.

Why? Because the Scriptures already contain sufficient testimony. If they reject God's revealed Word, a miraculous sign will not change hearts determined to remain unbelieving.

This lesson reaches beyond the Pharisees to every generation. Faith is not produced merely by spectacular experiences. It is born through hearing and believing the Word of God.

Does This Passage Teach Eternal Torment?

Can the account of the rich man and Lazarus be used as proof of eternal conscious torment?

It certainly demonstrates conscious experience within the story itself. But that fact alone does not answer the larger question.

If the account is a parable, its imagery should not automatically be treated as a literal description of the unseen world. If it is literal, it still describes the state before the final resurrection and before the Lake of Fire mentioned in Revelation 20.

Either way, caution is required before building an entire doctrine upon a single passage — especially one whose primary purpose appears to be confronting unbelief and the sufficiency of God's revealed Word.

The safest course is to interpret this account alongside the broader testimony of Scripture rather than allowing it to stand alone. In the chapters that follow, we will continue doing exactly that.

The Bible's final book contains the fullest description of the Lake of Fire. It is there that we must now turn, asking once

again not what tradition says, but what the Scriptures themselves reveal.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Lake of Fire and the Second Death



*"Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.
This is the second death."*

Revelation 20:14

At last we arrive at the passage that has shaped much of the Christian understanding of final judgment.

The expression "*the Lake of Fire*" appears only in the Book of Revelation. Surprisingly, although the idea of final judgment is found throughout Scripture, the phrase itself occurs only a handful of times (Revelation 19–21). This fact is worth remembering. If the Lake of Fire is to be understood correctly, it must be interpreted not only in light of Revelation but also in harmony with the rest of Scripture. The final book of the Bible completes God's revelation; it does not contradict what He has already revealed.

A Book Rich in Symbolism

Before examining the relevant passages, we should remember the nature of the Book of Revelation itself.

From its opening chapter, Revelation announces that its message is communicated through signs and symbols (Revelation 1:1). Throughout the book we encounter beasts with multiple heads, dragons, symbolic women, stars representing angels, lampstands representing churches, scrolls, trumpets, bowls, and many other vivid images.

This does not mean the events described are unreal. It means that God often communicates profound spiritual realities through symbolic language. Consequently, every image in Revelation must be interpreted carefully and, wherever possible, in the light of earlier Scripture.

Who Is Cast into the Lake of Fire?

The first mention of the Lake of Fire concerns the Beast and the False Prophet.

"These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone."

Revelation 19:20

In the next chapter, after the thousand years, the devil is also thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:10).

Then comes the final judgment. The dead stand before God. The books are opened. Those whose names are not found in the Book of Life are cast into the Lake of Fire.

John then makes a remarkable statement:

*"Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire.
This is the second death."*

Revelation 20:14

Notice what John does **not** say. He does not call the Lake of Fire "*the second life*." He calls it **the second death**.

This expression deserves to guide our interpretation. Whatever the Lake of Fire represents, John himself identifies it with the second death.

What Is the Second Death?

The first death is familiar to every human being. It is the death that entered the world through Adam's sin. Unless Christ returns first, every person experiences it.

The second death, however, is different. It occurs after the resurrection and final judgment. Unlike the first death, there is no resurrection from it. It is final. It is irreversible. It is the ultimate consequence of rejecting God's gift of eternal life.

This understanding fits naturally with the repeated biblical contrast between **life** and **death**. Throughout Scripture, eternal life is promised to the redeemed. The second death is reserved for those who finally reject God.

The contrast is consistent.

Life.

Death.

Fire as a Symbol of Judgment

Fire occupies an important place throughout the Bible. Sometimes it symbolizes God's presence, as with the burning bush (Exodus 3). Sometimes it represents purification, as gold refined in a furnace (Malachi 3:2–3). Frequently, however, fire represents judgment.

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven (Genesis 19:24). Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-2). The prophets repeatedly describe God's judgment using the imagery of consuming fire.

One feature appears again and again. Biblical fire **consumes**. It accomplishes God's purpose. It is not presented as preserving what it burns forever.

Indeed, the writer to the Hebrews reminds believers that "*our God is a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:29). The emphasis is upon God's holiness and His power to remove everything opposed to His righteous kingdom.

Sodom — The New Testament's Pattern of Final Judgment

If we want to understand how the New Testament writers themselves envisioned the final judgment, we should listen carefully to the example they repeatedly chose: Sodom and Gomorrah.

Peter writes:

"...and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly."

2 Peter 2:6

Read those words carefully. Peter does not say that Sodom and Gomorrah were preserved in conscious torment as a warning to others. He says they were *turned into ashes*. They were *condemned to destruction*. They were made an *example*. The Greek word translated *example* is *hypodeigma* — a pattern, a template, a foreshadowing.

Sodom is the New Testament's pattern of what happens to the ungodly at the final judgment.

And what happened to Sodom? It was destroyed. It became ashes. It is not still burning today. The destruction was complete; the consequences are eternal; the fire itself did its work and went out.

Jude reinforces the same imagery:

"...as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." — Jude 7

Sodom suffered the vengeance of eternal fire. The fire is called eternal. Yet Sodom is not still burning. The fire's vengeance is eternal because its result is eternal — total destruction that can never be undone. The fire itself completed its work in a single day.

This is the New Testament's own template for understanding the final judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah — not the imagined dungeons of medieval art, not the perpetual torture chambers of later theology — but cities reduced to ashes by a fire whose consequences are everlasting.

Other Destruction Passages

The same vocabulary appears throughout the New Testament.

Paul writes of the unredeemed:

"These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

2 Thessalonians 1:9

The punishment is *everlasting destruction*. Not everlasting preservation in destruction. Not endless punishing that never destroys. *Everlasting destruction* – destruction whose effects endure forever.

He writes elsewhere:

"...whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame – who set their mind on earthly things."

Philippians 3:19

The *end* of the unredeemed is destruction. Not endless suffering. Not perpetual existence under judgment. *Destruction*.

And the prophet Obadiah, foreseeing the day of the Lord, declares:

"For as you drank on My holy mountain, so shall all the nations drink continually; yes, they shall drink, and swallow, and they shall be as though they had never been."
— Obadiah 16

As though they had never been. This is one of the starkest verses in all of Scripture on the final fate of the wicked. Not as those who exist in everlasting agony. Not as those who endure conscious torment for the rest of history. *As though they had never been*.

The Witness of Psalm 37

For an Old Testament template of the fate of the wicked, no Psalm is more comprehensive than Psalm 37. Read it slowly. Notice the verbs.

"For evildoers shall be cut off... they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb... for yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more... but the wicked shall perish; and the enemies of the LORD, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away.... But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; the future of the wicked shall be cut off."

Psalm 37:9, 10, 20, 38 (selected)

Cut off. Cut down. Wither. No more. Perish. Vanish. Smoke. Destroyed.

The Psalmist piles up the verbs of cessation. The wicked do not endure in everlasting consciousness. They are cut off. They are no more. They vanish like smoke. The Psalmist's chosen images are not of preservation in suffering but of dissolution into nothing.

This Psalm, used in the worship of God's people for three thousand years, has been quietly teaching the same doctrine that Obadiah teaches, that 2 Peter 2:6 teaches, that 2 Thessalonians 1:9 teaches. The wicked perish. The wicked vanish. The wicked are no more.

Malachi's Closing Word

The Old Testament closes with one of its most explicit prophecies of the final judgment. Malachi writes:

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up... that will leave them neither root nor branch."

Malachi 4:1

He continues:

*"You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes
under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this."*

Malachi 4:3

These verses employ unmistakable language. Stubble. Neither root nor branch. Ashes. The imagery conveys complete destruction rather than endless preservation.

This is the final word of the Old Testament before four hundred years of silence preceded the gospel. The Hebrew Bible closes by promising not the eternal preservation of the wicked but the reduction of the wicked to ashes beneath the feet of the redeemed.

"The Smoke of Their Torment"

One of the strongest arguments for eternal conscious torment comes from Revelation 14:11.

*"And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever;
and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast
and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his
name."*

At first glance, this appears to settle the question. Yet we should ask whether similar language appears elsewhere in Scripture.

It does. Isaiah prophesied against Edom, declaring:

*"Its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its dust into
brimstone; its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not
be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever.
From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one
shall pass through it forever and ever." — Isaiah 34:9–10*

Today, Edom is not still burning. People do pass through it. The language signifies permanent, irreversible destruction whose effects endure forever. The rising smoke serves as a lasting testimony to God's completed judgment — not as evidence of unending combustion.

Similar imagery appears after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Abraham saw smoke rising "*like the smoke of a furnace*" (Genesis 19:28). The point was not perpetual burning throughout history but unmistakable evidence of divine judgment.

This does not automatically resolve Revelation 14. It does remind us that the Old Testament frequently uses the imagery of ascending smoke to describe judgments whose results are everlasting even though the burning itself is not.

Forever and Ever — *eis aiōnas aiōnōn*

The Greek phrase translated *forever and ever* in Revelation 14:11 and Revelation 20:10 is *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* — literally *into the ages of the ages*. This is the same construction used elsewhere in Revelation to describe God's own eternal nature:

- "*...to Him who lives forever and ever*" (Revelation 4:9).
- "*...to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever*" (Revelation 4:10).
- "*...the four living creatures who live forever and ever*" (Revelation 4:9).
- "*...blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever*" (Revelation 5:13).

- "...blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever" (Revelation 7:12).
- "...the One who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things that are in it" (Revelation 10:6).
- "...the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever" (Revelation 15:7).

So, someone would ask: If *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* means literal, unending, conscious duration when applied to the worshipers of the beast in Revelation 14:11 — must it not also mean literal, unending, conscious duration when applied to God Himself?

This is the very challenge that the traditional reading must face. If the smoke of the wicked's torment rises *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* in the same sense that God lives *eis aiōnas aiōnōn*, then the doctrine of conditional immortality has no answer.

But there are two important responses to this challenge.

First, the phrase *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* in Revelation must be read in context, and Revelation is the most explicitly symbolic book in the Bible. The same phrase that describes God's life literally may describe the wicked's *judgment* in the prophetic-symbolic register that the rest of the book uses. As we have seen with Isaiah 34, the Bible frequently uses *forever* language to describe the unending consequences of a judgment whose physical process is finite, that is, limited and not forever.

Second, we are not without other Scriptures that clarify what *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* means in the context of judgment. Sodom suffered *eternal fire* (Jude 7) — yet Sodom is ashes. Edom's smoke rises *forever* (Isaiah 34:10) — yet Edom is not burning today. The Bible itself teaches us how to read *forever* language

applied to judgment: it speaks of consequences, not of process.

When applied to God, *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* describes His unending life. When applied to judgment, it describes the unending finality of His verdict. The same words function differently in different contexts — exactly as they do in everyday speech. We say a court's verdict is *final* and that an athlete's victory is *final*; the word means the same thing but does different work in each case.

The reader who insists that *eis aiōnas aiōnōn* must mean exactly the same thing wherever it appears must explain not only the wicked's torment but also Edom's smoke. Both use the same construction. Only one explanation handles both consistently — the explanation that understands *eternal*, when it appears in passages about judgment, to mean a result that lasts forever, not a process of judgment that goes on forever.

Eternal Punishment or Eternal Punishing?

Few verses in the entire Bible are cited more often against the position of this booklet than Matthew 25:46. It deserves careful, dedicated treatment.

In His parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus declares:

*"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but
the righteous into eternal life."*

Matthew 25:46

The parallel is striking. *Everlasting punishment. Eternal life.* The same Greek word — *aiōnios* — modifies both *punishment* and *life*. If life is eternal in duration, does not the parallel require that punishment also be eternal in duration?

This is the strongest single argument from the traditional view, and it deserves a full answer.

The answer turns upon a distinction the English language makes more clearly than the Greek does: the distinction between **punishment** and **punishing**.

Punishment refers to the penalty imposed.

Punishing refers to the process of inflicting that penalty.

A capital sentence is a *punishment*. The process of carrying out that sentence is the *punishing*. The two are related but not identical. A man may receive a death sentence — that is, a punishment whose effects last forever — without being kept alive forever for the purpose of executing him.

The Greek word *kolasis* in Matthew 25:46 simply means *punishment*. Jesus does not specify whether the punishment consists in unending *process* or in unending *consequence*. He says the punishment is *aiōnios* — of the age, age-long, everlasting in nature. He does not say the punishing continues forever.

Compare this with the parallel passages we have already examined.

Hebrews speaks of "*eternal judgment*" (Hebrews 6:2). The judgment itself occurs at a moment in history. Its verdict, however, is eternal. The judgment is *aiōnios* because it can never be overturned.

Hebrews also speaks of "*eternal redemption*" (Hebrews 9:12). Christ is not continually redeeming throughout eternity. He redeemed once, at the cross. The redemption is *aiōnios* because its effects can never be undone.

Hebrews even speaks of "*eternal salvation*" (Hebrews 5:9). The salvation God gives to believers who endure to the end, through faith in Christ, is *aiōnios* because, once bestowed in its full reality at the resurrection, nothing can take it away.

The same word, *aiōnios*, is applied throughout Scripture to events whose duration is *not* infinite but whose *consequences* are. By the same biblical pattern, *everlasting punishment* in Matthew 25:46 can mean a punishment whose verdict is eternal — a punishment that, once executed, can never be reversed.

This reading does not weaken Jesus' words. It strengthens them. The punishment of the wicked is final. It is irreversible. It is *forever*. There is no possibility of repentance, no second chance, no future restoration. The sentence pronounced at the Great White Throne stands forever. That is what *everlasting punishment* means.

And what is that punishment? Scripture itself tells us. "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). "*This is the second death*" (Revelation 20:14). "*These shall be punished with everlasting destruction*" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

The punishment is death. The destruction is everlasting. The two go together.

The righteous receive *aiōnios life* — life whose duration cannot be ended. The wicked receive *aiōnios death* — death whose verdict cannot be reversed. Both are *aiōnios*. Neither requires that the wicked be kept alive forever in order to suffer forever. The parallel holds; only the content differs.

This is not theological sleight of hand. It is the simple recognition that the same biblical word does the same work in

eternal redemption, eternal judgment, eternal salvation, and eternal punishment. In each case the modifier *aiōnios* describes the unending nature of the consequence, not the unending nature of the process.

The traditional reading must insist that *kolasis aiōnios* uniquely means *aiōnios* process, even though every other use of *aiōnios* in the New Testament Hebrews uses describes *aiōnios* result. That insistence is what the conditional immortality view declines to make.

Punishment, not punishing. Verdict, not process. Final, not perpetual.

"They Shall Be Ashes"

Returning to Malachi 4 with the full weight of these arguments behind us, we can hear his words afresh.

"You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this."

Malachi 4:3

Ashes. Beneath the feet of the redeemed.

This is not the language of a furnace burning forever in some corner of the universe. This is the language of completion. The fire has done its work. The smoke has ascended. The judgment is final. What remains is ash — the visible memorial of a verdict that can never be reversed.

The redeemed walk upon what was once the wicked, not because they delight in another's suffering, but because the suffering is over and the dust beneath their feet testifies that God's righteousness has prevailed.

This is the picture the Bible gives us. It is severe. It is final. It is everlasting. But it is not eternal conscious torment.

The Harmony of Scripture

As we gather together the passages we have examined, a consistent pattern begins to emerge.

The wages of sin is death.

The gift of God is eternal life.

God alone possesses immortality inherently.

Believers receive immortality at the resurrection.

The final judgment is called the second death.

The wicked are compared to stubble consumed by fire and reduced to ashes.

The wicked vanish as smoke and shall be as though they had never been.

Sodom is the New Testament's pattern of the final judgment – not still burning, but consumed.

Eternal language applied to judgment describes the unending consequences of the verdict, not the unending duration of the process.

Everlasting punishment is the punishment whose result is everlasting – the second death.

None of these observations, considered individually, ends the discussion. Taken together, however, they invite us to ask whether the Bible's dominant emphasis falls upon the **everlasting conscious existence of the wicked** or upon their **final and irreversible destruction**.

That question now brings us to one final issue.

If this understanding is correct, what then is the purpose of God's judgment? Is it merely retribution? Or is it the necessary act by which God finally removes sin, death, and evil from His creation, making all things new?

Only after answering that question can we appreciate the glorious hope with which the Bible ends.

SELFEXAM

Whose Verdict Am I Hearing?

"...these shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

2 Thessalonians 1:9

The verdict of God is real. It is everlasting. It will not be revised, reversed, or appealed. The question is not whether God judges, but what His judgment finally does.

How have I been hearing the verdict of God? As an everlasting process that calls into question His character, or as an everlasting consequence that flows from His perfect righteousness? How does the picture of judgment I carry shape the gospel I am offering to those still outside of Christ?

CHAPTER NINE

Why Would a Loving God Judge at All?



"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Genesis 18:25

After examining the biblical testimony concerning humanity, immortality, death, the meaning of *hell*, and the Lake of Fire, one question still remains.

Even if the final judgment results in the complete destruction of the wicked rather than their eternal conscious torment, why is such a judgment necessary at all? Why would a God who is repeatedly described as love (1 John 4:8) bring any of His creatures to such an end?

This question deserves an honest answer. And I confess that I have asked it. Anyone who has lost a small child to measles has, at some point, asked God hard questions about His goodness. I have asked them quietly. I have asked them loudly. I have asked them in tears. I have not always received clear answers in the moment. But I have come to believe, after many years of looking into the Word, that the God revealed in Scripture is more patient, more merciful, and more longsuffering than I had imagined — and that His judgment, when it comes, is not the

contradiction of His love but its necessary completion.

A God Who Takes No Pleasure in Death

The Bible never presents God's judgment as the expression of uncontrolled anger or revenge. Neither does it portray Him as a reluctant judge who delights in punishment.

On the contrary, Scripture consistently reveals a God who is patient, merciful, and longsuffering. Peter writes that the Lord is *"not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

Ezekiel records God's own words:

"As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?"

Ezekiel 33:11

God's desire has always been life. Judgment becomes necessary only because love cannot permit evil to reign forever.

Even in the midst of pronouncing judgment, the prophet Jeremiah declares:

"For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."

Lamentations 3:33

This is the God of the Bible. He does not afflict *willingly*. The judgment that must come is not the expression of joyful wrath. It is the necessary outworking of righteous love that has long since done everything possible to bring sinners to repentance.

Paul speaks of this two-fold reality directly:

"Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off."

Romans 11:22

Goodness and severity. Both belong to God. Both are real. Both are righteous. The same love that opens the way of salvation will, in the end, close the door upon those who reject it. To imagine a God who is all goodness and no severity is to imagine a God who would let evil triumph. That is not the God of Scripture.

The Great Controversy

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells the story of two kingdoms. One is founded upon love, truth, humility, and obedience to God. The other is built upon pride, rebellion, deception, and self-exaltation.

Although Scripture does not describe every detail of Satan's original rebellion, it reveals enough for us to understand its seriousness. Passages such as Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:11–17, while interpreted differently by scholars, have long been understood by many Christians as reflecting, at least in part, the pride and downfall associated with Satan. Revelation 12:7–9 explicitly describes war in heaven and the casting down of *"the great dragon... that ancient serpent, called the Devil and Satan."*

From the beginning, Satan questioned God's character. In Eden, he persuaded humanity that God could not be trusted. The conflict was never merely about a forbidden tree. It was about whether God's rule is righteous and whether His

creatures would willingly choose to trust Him.

That conflict continues throughout human history.

Why Did God Not End the Rebellion Immediately?

This is one of the deepest questions in theology. Why did God permit Satan to continue after his rebellion?

Scripture does not give a complete answer. Any response must therefore be offered with humility. What follows is not an explicit biblical doctrine but a theological reflection based upon the broad narrative of Scripture.

If God had immediately destroyed Satan, would His creatures throughout the universe have served Him from love or from fear?

Love cannot be compelled.

Trust cannot be forced.

Obedience that arises solely from fear is not the relationship God desires with those made in His image.

Instead, God has allowed history to reveal the true nature and ultimate consequences of sin. The cross of Christ demonstrates both God's justice and His love. Human history demonstrates the devastating fruit of rebellion against Him. In the end, every intelligent creature will have witnessed the outcome of both paths. No one will be able to say that God's judgment was arbitrary or unjust.

Created for More Than Survival

The Bible reveals that God's purpose has always been far greater than simply rescuing sinners from punishment. He is calling a family.

Paul writes that believers are "*children of God*" and "*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ*" (Romans 8:16–17). Peter declares that through God's promises we become "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4).

John marvels:

"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

1 John 3:2

These remarkable passages point toward God's ultimate purpose. He is preparing men and women who freely choose to love Him, reflect His character, and share in His eternal kingdom through Jesus Christ.

Immortality is therefore not merely endless existence. It is participation in the life of God through His Son.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

This transformation begins even now. Those who belong to Christ receive the Holy Spirit.

Paul teaches that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him (Romans 8:9). He also describes the Holy Spirit as the guarantee, deposit, or first installment of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14; 2 Corinthians 5:5).

The Spirit does more than comfort believers. He transforms them. He produces the character of Christ. He prepares them for the resurrection.

The New Testament never presents eternal life as merely living forever. Rather, eternal life is sharing in the very life of God. Jesus prayed:

"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

John 17:3

Eternal life is therefore relational before it is chronological. It begins with knowing God and reaches its fullness in the resurrection.

Why Must Evil Finally End?

Imagine a universe in which rebellion, hatred, cruelty, deception, and violence never cease.

Would such a universe truly reflect God's victory? Would it display His perfect justice?

The Bible answers with a resounding no.

Again and again, Scripture promises that evil will come to an end. Nahum declares:

"What do you conspire against the LORD? He will make an utter end of it. Affliction will not rise up a second time."

Nahum 1:9

John sees a future in which there is no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). Paul proclaims that the final enemy to be destroyed is death itself (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The biblical hope is not that evil will be preserved forever in one corner of God's universe. It is that God will finally remove everything that corrupts His good creation.

Whether one understands the Lake of Fire as everlasting conscious punishment or as the final destruction of the wicked, every Christian agrees that God's judgment will be perfectly just. No one will receive less than justice. No one will receive more than justice.

Abraham's ancient question still echoes through the pages of Scripture:

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Genesis 18:25

The answer given by the whole Bible is clear.

He will.

He always has.

He always will.

And when His work of judgment is complete, the universe will stand cleansed — not because God delighted in judgment, but because His love would not permit sin and death to endure forever.

The final chapter of Scripture is therefore not about fire. It is about life. Not about death. But about resurrection. Not about the triumph of evil. But about the everlasting triumph of God through Jesus Christ.

SELFEXAM

Do I Trust the Character of God?

"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Genesis 18:25

Abraham asked the question on behalf of Sodom. It is a question for every age. The Judge of all the earth will do right. The question is whether I trust Him to.

When my heart struggles with the hard questions of judgment, do those struggles drive me toward God or away from Him? Is my picture of His character drawn from the cross, where He gave Himself for me — or from elsewhere? What might it look like to trust Him with the questions I have not yet been able to answer?

CHAPTER TEN

The Blessed Hope – Resurrection, Eternal Life, and the Kingdom of God



*"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become
the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."*

1 Corinthians 15:20

The Bible does not end with judgment.

It ends with hope.

This is one of the most beautiful features of God's revelation. Although the Scriptures speak honestly about sin, death, and judgment, they never leave God's people there. The final chapters of the Bible direct our attention beyond the defeat of evil to the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose.

The Christian faith is therefore not built upon escaping hell.

It is built upon the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death.

The Christian Hope Is Resurrection

If one were to ask the apostles what the believer's great hope is, their answer would not be uncertain. Again and again, they point to the resurrection.

Paul devotes the entire fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians to defending this truth. He argues that if Christ has not been raised, Christian faith is futile and those who have died in Christ have perished (1 Corinthians 15:17–18).

But Christ has been raised.

His resurrection is not merely proof that life continues after death. It is the guarantee that death itself will one day be abolished.

Jesus described Himself as *"the resurrection and the life"* (John 11:25). He did not simply promise comfort after death. He promised victory over death.

The resurrection is therefore not an appendix to the gospel. It is at its very heart.

The Witness Across the Ages

The hope of resurrection is not a New Testament invention. It runs like a golden thread from the most ancient writings of Scripture to the closing visions of John on Patmos.

Job, as we have seen, declared it from the ash heap:

"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God...." — Job 19:25–26

Isaiah, in the midst of prophecies of judgment, gives voice to the same hope:

"Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead."

Isaiah 26:19

Ezekiel sees the same hope in his great vision of the valley of dry bones:

"Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: 'Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live'.... So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army."

Ezekiel 37:5, 10

Daniel hears it sealed up until the end of the age:

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Daniel 12:2

And Paul, in the New Testament's fullest expression of the resurrection hope, writes to comfort the grieving Thessalonians:

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord." — 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17

From Job to Isaiah to Ezekiel to Daniel to Paul, the same hope is sounded. Not the survival of disembodied spirits. Not the gradual ascent of immortal souls into heaven. The resurrection of the body — the trumpet, the voice of the Lord, the dead in Christ rising first.

This is what every faithful witness of Scripture has been waiting for.

PERSON BOX

MARTHA: *The Quietly Orthodox Sister*

Martha is often remembered for the dinner. We picture her bustling in the kitchen while her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet. We hear her complaint — *"Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me"* (Luke 10:40) — and we file her away as the practical, anxious one of the two sisters.

But Martha said something else, in a different chapter, on a darker day, that deserves to be one of the most quoted sentences in the New Testament.

Her brother Lazarus had died. Jesus, who could have come and healed him, had deliberately waited until he was four days in the tomb. When Jesus finally approached the village of Bethany, Martha — *of course it was Martha* — was the one who went out to meet Him.

The first thing she said was honest grief: *"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died"* (John 11:21). But her grief did not end the conversation. She added immediately: *"But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You"* (John 11:22). The grief did not cancel her faith. Her faith did not cancel her grief. Both stood together, the way both stand together in every honest believer.

Then Jesus said to her, *"Your brother will rise again"* (John 11:23). And Martha, perhaps a little weary of well-intended comforts that did not touch the actual wound, gave her quietly orthodox reply:

"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

John 11:24

Read those words slowly. *I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*

Martha was not making theology up in the moment. She was reciting what she had always believed. This was the hope of every faithful first-century Jew. This was the hope of every faithful Israelite from Job and Isaiah and Daniel down to her own day. *The resurrection at the last day.* That is what Martha was waiting for. That is where she expected to see Lazarus again.

She did not say, "I know that Lazarus is now consciously with Abraham in paradise." She did not say, "I know his soul is at peace before God." She did not say any of the things our funeral comfort routinely says. She said *the resurrection at the last day.* She had not been to seminary. She had not read systematic theology. She had simply read the same Scriptures we have. And her instinctive theology was the theology of Job and the Psalms and the Prophets and Jesus and Paul.

The dead sleep. The hope is the resurrection. *At the last day.* That is what every grieving Christian should be able to say at every Christian graveside.

Martha, though pictured by many as a work-focused, busy young woman, is above all a witness to the original Christian hope before the philosophies of later centuries refashioned it. The kitchen sister was also the theologian.

"This Mortal Must Put On Immortality"

Paul's language is deliberate.

"For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.'" — 1

Corinthians 15:53–54

Notice that immortality is not described as something believers have always possessed. It is something they receive at the resurrection.

The body that is buried in weakness is raised in power.

The body that is perishable is raised imperishable.

The natural body gives way to the spiritual body.

This is not the abandonment of creation. It is its glorious transformation. The resurrection completes what God began in Genesis.

The Holy Spirit — God's Pledge of What Is to Come

God has not left His people uncertain about their future. Those who belong to Christ have been given the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of their inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). Paul says that the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies (Romans 8:11).

The Holy Spirit is therefore not the resurrection itself. He is God's pledge that the resurrection will surely come. What God has begun, He will complete.

PERSON BOX

STEPHEN: The First to Test the Promise

When the church was young, when the apostles were still bearing fresh witness to the resurrection of their Lord, when the early believers were still discovering what it meant to be the people of Christ in a hostile world — a man named Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin and preached.

Luke gives us his sermon in Acts 7. It is one of the longest sermons in the New Testament. It traces the story of Israel from Abraham through Joseph through Moses through David through Solomon and concludes with an accusation his hearers could not bear:

"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

Acts 7:51

They were furious. *"They gnashed at him with their teeth"* (Acts 7:54) — the same image Jesus had used in the parables of judgment. Stephen looked up. The heavens opened. He saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. *"Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"* (Acts 7:56).

Then they stoned him. He prayed. *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.... Lord, do not charge them with this sin."*

Then Luke writes one of the most consequential sentences in the New Testament. The sentence that tells us what the early church understood about death.

"And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Acts 7:60

He fell asleep.

◆ This is the first Christian martyrdom. This is the death of a man so full of the Holy Spirit that his face had shone "*as the face of an angel*" (Acts 6:15). This is the death of a man who, in his final moments, had seen the open heaven and the standing Son of Man. And Luke, recording this most important of early Christian deaths under the inspiration of the Spirit, chooses one word to describe what happened to him.

He *fell asleep*.

Not *flew to heaven*. Not *was immediately ushered into the presence of the Lord*. Not *consciously joined the saints above*. He **fell asleep**.

Luke uses the same word for Stephen that Jesus used for Lazarus. The same word that Paul uses for the deceased Thessalonians. The same word that David and Job and Daniel knew. *Sleep*.

If anyone in the New Testament should have departed at the moment of death into immediate, conscious, glorious life with Christ, it was Stephen. He had seen the open heaven. He had asked Jesus to receive his spirit. He died forgiving his murderers. If the New Testament wanted to teach that the dead go immediately into conscious life with Christ, here was the perfect moment to say it. Luke could have written, "*And he was received into the bosom of the Lord*." He could have written, "*And immediately his spirit ascended to glory*." He could have written, "*And he passed into the conscious presence of his Lord*." He did not.

He wrote, *he fell asleep*.

Stephen has been sleeping now for two thousand years. He will sleep until the trumpet. And on that day his eyes will open, and the first face he sees will be the face of the standing Son of Man he saw last in his final living moment.

◆

The first martyr is therefore the first witness from the church side of the cross to the doctrine of sleep until the resurrection. The very church that watched Stephen die — that took up his body to bury it (Acts 8:2) — believed he was now resting until the day of his Lord.

That is the original Christian hope.

That is the hope of every believer who has died since.

Where Will God's Kingdom Be?

Many Christians naturally speak of "going to heaven" after death. Certainly, Scripture teaches that Christ ascended into heaven, that He intercedes for His people there, and that our citizenship is in heaven (Acts 1:9–11; Hebrews 7:25; Philippians 3:20).

Yet the Bible's final vision is even more wonderful. John writes:

"Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

Revelation 21:2

Notice the direction. The New Jerusalem comes **down** from heaven. God declares:

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."

Revelation 21:3

The climax of redemption is not humanity permanently leaving the earth to dwell elsewhere. It is God dwelling with redeemed

humanity in the renewed creation.

This fulfills the promise Jesus made:

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Matthew 5:5

Likewise, Revelation declares that the redeemed *"shall reign on the earth"* (Revelation 5:10).

The Bible begins with humanity in a garden. It ends with humanity in a renewed creation where God dwells among His people forever.

Death Will Be No More

Perhaps the most comforting promise in all Scripture appears near the close of Revelation.

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:4

This promise deserves careful reflection.

If death is no more... If mourning is no more... If pain is no more... If every enemy has been defeated...

Then God's purpose has been completely accomplished. Nothing remains to threaten the peace of His everlasting Kingdom.

The final chapters of Revelation portray a universe fully restored under the righteous reign of God and of the Lamb.

The Tree of Life Restored

The Bible's final vision brings us back to where the story began.

In Genesis, humanity lost access to the Tree of Life because of sin. In Revelation, that access is restored. John sees:

*"In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river,
was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree
yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were
for the healing of the nations."*

Revelation 22:2

The symbolism is profound. What was lost through Adam is restored through Christ.

Life triumphs over death. Grace triumphs over sin. The curse is removed. God's original purpose is fulfilled.

The story comes full circle.

The Gift Beyond All Gifts

From beginning to end, the Bible presents eternal life not as humanity's natural possession but as God's gracious gift through His Son.

Everything points to Jesus Christ.

He is the source of life. He is the conqueror of death. He is the resurrection. He is the King of the coming Kingdom.

Outside Him there is no eternal life. In Him, death has lost its sting.

As John writes with beautiful simplicity:

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

1 John 5:12

Those words summarize the hope of the gospel. God is not merely offering escape from judgment. He is offering life — abundant life now, and everlasting life in the age to come.

The Bible closes, not with the smoke of judgment, but with an invitation:

"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely."

Revelation 22:17

That invitation remains open today.

A Personal Word

When my wife Oluwatohungbogbo went on ahead of us in 2024, I did not say goodbye.

I said silently to her in my mind, as I poured sand onto the casket being lowered into the grave, "Sleep, my dear T Baby. I will see you in the Kingdom at the sound of the trumpet."

That hope is the heartbeat of this book. It is the hope of Job, and of David, and of Hezekiah, and of Daniel, and of Martha, and of Stephen, and of Paul. It is the hope of every faithful believer who has ever closed his eyes on this side of the veil. It is the hope that gives Christian grief its dignity and its limits. It is the hope that lets us bury our dead without despair and walk on without bitterness.

The dead sleep.

The trumpet will sound.
The Redeemer will stand upon the earth.
And those who are His will rise to meet Him.
I shall see her there.
And so shall you see those you have loved.
For this is the gospel.

SELFEXAM

Where Do I Look for the Lord's Return?

*"This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven,
will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."*

Acts 1:11

He left from the Mount of Olives. He will return to the Mount of Olives. The earth is not the temporary stage we leave behind; it is the home being prepared for the King's coming.

Have I been waiting for an escape from this earth, or for the King to come back to it? How does the hope of the Lord's return — and of the resurrection that meets Him — shape how I live in this present age, how I steward this present body, how I love the people God has put in my life?

Conclusion: What Is the Truth About the Lake of Fire?



Every generation of Christians must decide whether it will build its beliefs primarily upon inherited tradition or upon the testimony of Scripture examined carefully, prayerfully, and humbly.

This booklet has not attempted to answer every question surrounding the final judgment. Some passages remain challenging, and faithful followers of Christ have differed in their interpretations for centuries. We should therefore approach this subject with humility, avoiding dogmatism where Scripture itself invites careful study.

At the same time, several truths have emerged repeatedly from the biblical record.

The Bible consistently presents God as the only One who possesses immortality inherently.

Human beings are created, dependent, and repeatedly described as mortal.

Eternal life is never presented as an automatic possession of every person. It is the gracious gift of God through Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament consistently describes the dead as sleeping until the resurrection, knowing nothing, praising nothing, planning nothing, until the trumpet awakens them.

The great hope of believers is not simply life after death but the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of mortality into immortality.

The final judgment is repeatedly described as *the second death*.

The wicked are compared to stubble consumed by fire and reduced to ashes, and shall be as though they had never been.

Sodom and Gomorrah — destroyed and reduced to ashes — are the New Testament's own pattern of the final judgment.

Eternal punishment describes the unending consequence of God's verdict, not the unending duration of His punishing.

The Scriptures speak with one voice in declaring that sin will not reign forever, death will be abolished, and God will make all things new.

Whether readers ultimately conclude that the Lake of Fire signifies eternal conscious torment or the final destruction of the wicked, every Christian should affirm that God's judgment will be perfectly righteous, perfectly holy, and perfectly just.

Our confidence rests not in our ability to solve every theological question but in the character of the One who judges. Abraham asked, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*" (Genesis 18:25). The answer remains the same. He will.

The purpose of this booklet has not been to diminish the seriousness of God's judgment. Rather, it has been to encourage readers to examine the whole counsel of God and to appreciate the grandeur of His plan of redemption.

The gospel is ultimately not a message about hell.

It is a message about Christ.

It is the announcement that through His death and resurrection, God has opened the way for sinful men and women to receive forgiveness, reconciliation, resurrection, and eternal life.

That is the heartbeat of the Christian faith.

The final invitation of Scripture is therefore wonderfully simple.

Choose life.

Receive the Son.

Walk by His Spirit.

Look forward with hope to the resurrection.

For the God who formed humanity from the dust has promised that, through Jesus Christ, death will not have the final word.

Life will.

Amen.

"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

— 1 John 5:12

About the Author



Oludare Akinbo is a Christian author from Lagos, Nigeria, who has been studying the Scriptures for over four decades. He writes this book from personal experience of profound loss, and from a long-held passion for the questions such loss raises — offering readers what he himself walked to a public library at the age of fourteen to find: an honest, scripturally grounded answer to the deepest questions about life, death, and what comes after.

He is the author of *Finding God in Grief*, *Yet Will I Trust Him*, *Finding Love Again*, *Raising Children Who Fear God*, *Owe No Man Anything But to Love*, *A Friend Loves at All Times*, and other devotional works — most of which are made available as free PDFs at **oludareakinbo.com** as gifts to readers around the world.

He is married to **Ruth Morenike Akinbo**, and is the grateful father of Oluwadurotiwa, Olaoluwatomiwale, and Oluwanifewa. His first wife, Oluwatohungbogbo Toluwalope, fell asleep in Christ in April 2024 after a year of trusting God through her battle with leukaemia. Her witness is the foundation beneath this book.