

A Biblical View Of Human Nature

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues List:

It is hard to believe that in few days we will enter in 1999-the last year of the second millennium. May I take this opportunity to wish to each one of you a most blessed and prosperous New Year. May the dawning of the New Year impress upon our consciousness that "now it is full time to wake from sleep. For **salvation is nearer** to us now than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11).

There seems to be a prevailing perception that the year 2000 could be a critical, pivotal year in the history of mankind, since it brings to a close about 6000 years of human history. Some speculate that the year 2000 could well mark the end of the present age and the inauguration of a new age by Christ's coming.

As a church historian I am reminded of the fact speculations about the significance of the year 2000 are not new. In fact already early in the second century, Barnabas (A. D. 135), known as an "Apostolic Father," interpreted the six days of creation as representing a cosmic week of six thousand years duration of this present age, to be followed by the seventh millennium of sabbatical peace and rest on this earth.

This interpretation of the creation week as representing a 6000 years duration of this present age to be followed by the eternal Kingdom of God, has been reprocessed by many Christian writers. Consequently, we should not be surprised if speculations about the eschatological significance of the approaching year 2000 are intensifying today.

We cannot ignore the significance of the fast approaching year 2000, especially as we see the unprecedented fulfillment of many Endtime signs today. During the coming months I plans to share with you members of this **Endtime Issues** forum, my biblical analysis of some of the Endtime signs we witness today. One of them is the intensification of the deception of conscious life after death we began discussing in the first essay. I believe that God has given us these signs to nourish our hope and strengthen our faith in the certainty and eminence of Christ's coming. On the other hand, I hasten to say that we must resist the temptation to engage in sensational prognostications of the time of the End.

The function of the Endtime signs is to encourage, not calculation, prognostication, or procrastination, but rather constant preparation and watchfulness. If the intention of Bible prophecies was to enable believers to know the exact moment when major events will occur, then these events would have been given in a precise, incontrovertible way. But this has never been the function of prophecy.

Many prophecies were given by Old Testament prophets regarding the First Advent of the Messiah, but when He came there was considerable perplexity regarding the time and manner of His Coming. Even a man of faith like John the Baptist was confused. You recall when he sent disciples to Jesus to ask Him: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we wait for another" (Matt 11:3). If believers like John the Baptist could have problems in understanding the predictions about Christ's first coming, we have reasons to believe that we believers today may have similar difficulties in understanding the exact fulfillment of the Endtime prophecies regarding Christ's Second Coming.

To avoid future disappointments, it is important to recognize that the function of the Endtime prophecies is to encourage, not sensational prognostications, but constant preparation and watchfulness. The keynote of Christ's prophetic discourse where

significant endtime signs are given, is: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt 24:42 cf. vv. 4, 44; 25:13). To watch means to be open every day to witness and experience the unexpected. Genuine Christian living involves a constant response to the unexpected: "Watch therefore, for you do not know." Beware of anyone who claims know what God has chosen not to reveal to us. We shall keep in mind this divine admonition in our study of Endtime prophecies during the coming months.

BIBLICAL VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

In the first essay of **Endtime Issues** we noted that the belief in conscious life after death is one of the greatest deception of our times. Such a belief is promoted today not only by the Catholic and Protestant teachings on the immortality of the soul, but also by the polished image of mediums and psychics, the sophisticated "scientific" research into near-death experiences, and the popular New Age channeling craze with the alleged spirits of the past.

Over a century ago Ellen White predicted: "**Through the two great errors, the immortality of the soul and Sunday sacredness, Satan will bring the people under his deceptions**" (Great Controversy, p. 588). Both of these errors are spreading like wildfire today. The vast majority of people have come to believe Satan's lie that no matter what they do, they "shall not die" (Gen 3:4) but become like gods by living for ever. This lie has fostered a host of heresies such as spiritualism, communication with the spirits of the dead, praying for the dead, the intercession of the saints, purgatory, eternal hellfire, the worship of Mary, indulgences, etc. All of these heretical beliefs fall automatically like dominos when we expose the fallacies of conscious life between death and resurrection.

In the first essay we have shown that the belief in conscious life after death derives from a dualistic view of human nature which is foreign to the Bible. The dualistic view maintains that human nature consists of a material, mortal body and a spiritual, immortal soul. The latter survives the death of the body and transits to heaven, or purgatory, or hell. At the resurrection, the soul is reunited with the body. We noted that this dualistic conception of human nature has had an enormous impact on Christian life and thought, affecting people's view of human life, this present world, redemption, and the world to come.

To challenge the prevailing deception of conscious life after death and the host of heresies derived from it, it is imperative for us to diligently examine what the Bible actually teaches regarding the make up of human nature. Is human nature dualistic, consisting of a mortal body and an immortal soul that leaves the body at death? Or, is human nature wholistic, consisting of an indivisible person where the soul is the animating principle of the body, both of which cease to exist at death until the resurrection?

This essay explores the Biblical view of human nature from three perspectives: Creation, the Fall, and Redemption. We will consider what human nature was at creation, what it became after the Fall, and what it can become as a result of redemption. These thoughts are excerpted from my book ***Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny***, where reader will find a comprehensive treatment of the subject.¹ This book came off the press on December 1997, and has already been favorably reviewed by over 50 scholars of different persuasions. I would be glad to email you their reviews, if you are interested to read them.

Some members of our forum have encouraged me to keep my essays shorter and simpler because they do not have time to read lengthy and deep Bible studies. I will try to keep these legitimate concerns in mind by limiting my Bible studies to an average length of 30K or less. I will also try to write in a simple, non-technical language that the average person can understand. On the other hand I need to keep in mind that several hundred subscribers are Bible teachers, pastors, and educated lay person who appreciate the challenge of a deeper Biblical analysis of current issues. Please do not give up if you find

some material deeper than what you are accustomed to. Mental and spiritual growth takes place only when we stretch our resources to meet new challenges.

May I draw your attention to two important points found in the essay you are about to read. The first is the frequent reference in Genesis to animals as "living souls"- which is the same expression used to characterize human beings. This is significant because it shows that the "soul" is not an immaterial, immortal substance that only humans possess, but is the animating principle of life common to all living creatures. The second point is Paul's reference to the "spirit" 146 times, compared with only 13 references to the "soul." Furthermore, Paul never uses the "soul- *psyche*" to denote the life that survives death. Why, most likely because such term could mislead his Gentile converts into thinking of eternal life according to the Greek view of innate immortality. Both of these points are expanded considerably in Chapter 2 ***Immortality or Resurrection?*** which I would be glad to email to those who request it.

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HUMAN NATURE AT CREATION

The creation story informs us that God created human nature as a wholistic organism, consisting of body, the breath of life, and soul, all of which are characteristics of the same person. These distinctive characteristics of human nature are expressed in two major texts. The first, Genesis 1:26-27, tells us how God planned to create human beings, and the second, Genesis 2:7, tells us how He did it. "Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;' . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27)

Elaborate attempts have been made to define what the "image of God" is in which man was created. Some contend that the image of God is the immaterial, spiritual soul implanted in the human body . Thus, Calvin affirms: "It cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is the soul."²

This view presupposes a dualism between body and soul which is not found in the account of creation. Man did not receive a soul from God; he was made a living soul. The animals also were made "living souls" (Gen 1:20, 21, 24, 30; 2:19), yet, they were not created in the image of God.

The image of God in mankind is to be found in the unique moral and rational capacities granted to human beings to reflect His moral character. Conformity to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49) is understood, not in terms of an immortal soul implanted in human nature, but in terms of righteousness and holiness: "Put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10; cf. Eph 4:24). By virtue of being created in the image of God, human beings are capable of reflecting His character in their own life.

Immortality is never mentioned in the Bible in connection with the image of God in human beings. The tree of life represented immortality in fellowship with the Creator, but as a result of sin, Adam and Eve were barred access to the source of continuous life.

Genesis 2:7: "A Living Soul." The second important Biblical statement for understanding human nature at creation is the brief account of the actual creation of man: "Then God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7). Historically, this text has been read through the lenses of dualism. It has been assumed that the breath of life God breathed into Adam's nostrils was simply an immaterial, immortal soul that God implanted into his body. Thus, the phrase "man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7; KJV) has been interpreted to

mean that "man obtained a living soul." And just as earthly life begins with the implantation of an immortal soul into a physical body, so, according to dualists, it ends when the soul departs from the body.

The problem with this interpretation lies in the fact that the "breath [*neshamah*] of life" that God breathed into Adam's nostrils, was not an immortal soul that God implanted into Adam's material body, but God's life-giving Spirit that is often characterized as the "breath of God." Thus, we read in Job 33:4: "The spirit [*ruach*] of God has made me, and the breath [*neshamah*] of the Almighty gives me life." The parallelism between the "spirit of God" and "the breath of the Almighty" which is often found in the Bible (Is 42:5; Job 27:3; 34:14-15), suggests that the two are used interchangeably because they both refer to the gift of life imparted by God to His creatures.

The life-giving Spirit of God is described by the suggestive imagery of the "breath of life," because breathing is a tangible manifestation of life. A person who no longer breathes is dead. Job says: "As long as my breath [*neshamah*] is in me, and the spirit [*ruach*] of God is in my nostrils; my lips will not speak falsehood" (Job 27:3). Here the human "breath" and the divine "spirit" are equated, because breathing is seen as a manifestation of the sustaining power of God's Spirit.

Possession of the "breath of life" does not in itself confer immortality, because at death "the breath of life" returns to God. Life derives from God, is sustained by God, and returns to God. This truth is expressed in Ecclesiastes 12:7: "The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." What returns to God is not the human immortal soul, but God's life giving Spirit which in Scripture is equated with God's breath: "If he [God] should take back his spirit [*ruach*] to himself, and gather to himself his breath [*neshamah*], all flesh would perish together, and man would return to the dust" (Job 34:14-15). The parallelism indicates that God's breath is His life-giving Spirit.

The fact that death is characterized as the withdrawal of the breath of life (God's life-giving Spirit), shows that the "breath of life" is not an immortal spirit or soul that God confers on His creatures, but rather the gift of life which human beings possess for the duration of their earthly existence. As long as the "breath of life" remains, human beings are "living souls." But when the breath departs, they become dead souls. This explains why the Bible frequently refers to human death as the death of the soul (Lev 19:28; 21:1, 11; 22:4; Num 5:2; 6:6,11; 9:6, 7, 10; 19:11, 13; Hag 2:13).

Body is Visible Soul. Most Bible scholars recognize that the "soul-*nephesh*" in Genesis 2:7 is not a distinct immaterial, immortal essence implanted in the body, but is simply the animating principle of the body. Commenting on Genesis 2:7, Catholic scholar Dom Wulstan Mork, writes: "It is *nephesh* [soul] that gives life to the *bashar* [body], but not as a distinct substance. Adam does not have *nephesh* [soul]; he is *nephesh* [soul], just as he is *bashar* [body]. The body, far from being divided from its animating principle, is the visible *nephesh* [soul]."³ In a similar vein, Hans Walter Wolff, author of the state-of-the-art study *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, asks: "What does *nephesh* [soul] mean here? Certainly not soul [in the traditional dualistic sense]. . . . man does not have *nephesh* [soul], he is ! *nephesh* [soul], he lives as *nephesh* [soul]."⁴

Summing up, the expression "man became a living soul-*nephesh hayyah*" simply means that as a result of the divine inbreathing, the lifeless body became a living, breathing being, no more, no less. The heart began to beat, the blood to circulate, the brain to think, and all the vital signs of life were activated. Simply stated, "a living soul" means "a living being," and not "an immortal soul."

Animals as "Living Souls." A most compelling proof that "living soul" does not mean "immortal soul" is the repeated use of the same phrase "living soul-*nephesh hayyah*" to describe the creation of animals (Gen 1:20, 21, 24, 30; 2:19; 9:10, 12, 15, 16; Lev 11:46). This important fact is unknown to most people because the translators of most English versions have chosen to translate the Hebrew phrase "*nephesh hayyah*" as "living creatures" when it refers to animals and as "living soul" when used for human

beings. Why? **Simply because the translators were so biased by their belief that only human beings have an immortal soul which animals do not have, that they took the liberty of translating the Hebrew nephesh as "creature" rather than "soul" whenever it is used for animals.**

Norman Snaitch rightly condemns this arbitrary mistranslation as "most reprehensible" because "the Hebrew phrase should be translated exactly the same way in both cases. To do otherwise is to mislead all those who do not read Hebrew. There is no excuse and no proper defense."⁵

The repeated use of nephesh-soul to refer to all sorts of animals clearly shows that nephesh-soul is not an immortal essence given to human beings, but the animating principle of life or "the life-breath" which is present in both people and animals because both are conscious beings. What distinguishes human beings from animals is not the soul, but the fact that humans were created in God's image, that is, with godlike possibilities unavailable to animals.

The Biblical account of man's creation indicates that human nature consists of an indivisible whole where the body, the breath of life, and the soul function, not as separate entities, but as characteristics of the same person. The body is a person as a concrete being; the soul is a person as a living individual; the breath of life or spirit is a person as having his source in God. This is in essence the creational wholistic view of human nature which is expanded in the rest of the Bible.

HUMAN NATURE AFTER THE FALL

The Fall did not change the make up of human nature, but it did change its state or condition. From a state in which it was possible for human beings not to die (conditional immortality), they passed into a state in which it was impossible for them not to die (unconditional mortality). Prior to the Fall the assurance of immortality was vouchsafed by partaking of the tree of life, not by the possession of an immortal soul. The presence of the "tree of life" in the garden of Eden indicates that immortality was conditional to the partaking of the fruit of that tree.

To prevent sinful humanity the possibility to "live for ever" (Gen 3:22), after the Fall God barred the access to the tree of life (Gen 3:22-23). This divine act per se reveals that at creation immortality was not an endowment residing in the soul, but a possibility conditional upon human obedience. Those who insist in finding the immortality in the soul, read into the human creation dualistic Greek ideas foreign to the Bible.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve no longer had access to the tree of life (Gen 3:22-23) and, consequently, began experiencing the reality of the dying process. The fact that Adam and Eve did not die on the day of their transgression, as God had warned them (Gen 2:17), has led some to conclude that they did not die because they were endowed with an immortal soul. This imaginative interpretation can hardly be supported by the text, which, literally translated, reads: "dying you shall die." What God simply meant is that on the day they disobeyed, the dying process would begin.

The Whole Person Dies. The divine warning (Gen 2:17) places a clear ethical connection between life and obedience versus death and disobedience. Human nature was not created with an immortal soul, but with the possibility of becoming immortal. Disobedience resulted in death, not just for the body, but for the whole person. God did not say: "in the day that you eat of it your body shall die but your soul will survive in a disembodied state." Rather He said: "You," that is, your whole person, "shall die."

This is a fundamental teaching of the Bible. The wages of sin is death, not just for the body, but for the whole person (Rom 6:23; Ez 18:4, 20). "The soul that sins shall die" (Ez 18:4). The death of the body is linked to the death of the soul because the body is the visible form of the soul. This explains why the death of a person is often described as the death of the soul. (Num 31:19; 35:15,30; Jos 20:3, 9; Gen 37:21; Deut 19:6, 11; Jer

40:14, 15; Judg 16:30; Num 23:10). As Joshua conquered the various cities beyond the Jordan, we are told repeatedly "he utterly destroyed every soul [*nephesh*]" (Jos 10:28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 38). The destruction of the body is seen as the destruction of the soul because at death the soul ceases to function as the animating life-principle of the body.

Summing up, human nature after the Fall passed from a state of conditional immortality to a state of unconditional mortality for the whole person. The traditional and popular belief that the soul survives the body at death, can be traced back to Satan's deceptive lie, "You shall not die" (Gen 3:4). This subtle lie has lived on in different forms throughout human history until our time.

Our only protection against this popular deception is to be found through a clear understanding of the Biblical view of human nature and destiny. Scripture teaches that immortality is not a natural endowment of the soul, but the gift of God (Rom 6:23) to be sought (Rom 2:7) and put on (1 Cor 15:53) at the resurrection by those who have accepted the gracious provision of salvation (John 17:2-3; Matt 19:29).

HUMAN NATURE AS A RESULT OF REDEMPTION

Redemption reveals the value God places upon human nature because it tells us that He chose to redeem human nature by assuming it through the incarnation of His Son. "He became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The idea of the Son of God assuming a physical human nature was incomprehensible to the Gnostics, an influential early Christian movement largely influenced by Greek dualism. They openly rejected the incarnation of Christ because they saw no value in the physical aspect of human nature. This forcefully illustrates the difference between the Biblical wholistic view of human nature, which places value on the body, and the Greek dualistic view, which regards the body as the prison house of the soul to be discarded at death.

The fact that the divine Son of God took on a mortal human body at birth and retained a glorified human body at His resurrected (John 20:27), shows in the strongest possible way that human nature has its place in God's eternal purpose. It tells us that the body it is not a temporary prison house or proving ground for "souls," but our total personality that God is committed to preserve and bring back to life on the day of the resurrection.

The Moral Regeneration of Human Nature. The purpose of Christ's redemptive mission is not the liberation of the soul from the body, but the regeneration of the whole person in this present life and the resurrection of the whole person in the world to come. The Spirit of God is the active agent in both the creation and re-creation of human nature. The re-creation of human nature takes place in two phases: the moral regeneration takes place in this present life and physical transformation from mortality to immortality will occur at the resurrection. The function of the Spirit-*pneuma* as life-principle is expanded in the New Testament to include both the present moral regeneration and the future physical transformation.

At creation man was made a living soul by the Spirit of God (Gen 2:7). As a result of redemption believers are made a new creation by the work of the Holy Spirit. The moral regeneration accomplished by the Holy Spirit is described by John as rebirth (John 3:5) and by Paul as new creation.

Paul attributes vital importance to the role of the Spirit in the new life of the believer (2 Cor 5:17; cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 3:27; 6:15; Eph 4:24). This is indicated by the fact that in his letters he refers to the "spirit" 146 times, compared with only 13 references to the "soul." Furthermore, Paul never uses the "soul- *psyche*" to denote the life that survives death. On the contrary, Paul uses the phrase *soma psychikon*, which literally means "soulish body," to describe the physical body that will be changed into the spiritual body (*soma pneumatikon*) at the resurrection. **The reason Paul avoids the use of the term "soul- *psyche*" to designate the life to come, is most likely because such**

term could mislead his Gentile converts into thinking of eternal life according to the Greek view of innate immortality.

To ensure that salvation be understood exclusively a divine gift of grace mediated by "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:2), Paul emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit both in the moral regeneration of this present life (Eph 4:23; Rom 8:5) and physical transformation of the life to come (Rom 8:11, 22-23). Both creation and recreation, birth and rebirth, are acts of the Spirit because, as Jesus explained, "It is the Spirit that gives life" (John 6:63).

Physical Transformation of Human Nature. The ultimate transformation of the human nature will be realized on the glorious day of Christ's Coming "when the perishable put on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality" (1 Cor 15:54). Paul reassures the believers that "the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead . . . will give life to your mortal bodies" (Rom 8:11). It is evident that immortality is not a natural endowment of the soul, but a divine gift mortal bodies will receive ("put on") at the resurrection.

The ultimate transformation of human nature is described as "the resurrection of the body" because the New Testament never accepted the belief in the immortality of the soul. Life without the body is inconceivable in the Bible, because the body is the concrete expression of the whole person. Its resurrection is indispensable to ensure a full personality and life in the new earth.

It is noteworthy that in 1 Corinthians 15, the only chapter in the Bible fully devoted to the resurrection/translation of believers, there is no reference to the reattachment of resurrected bodies to spiritual souls. In fact, in **the whole chapter Paul never mentions the "soul-psyche."** If the resurrection involved the reattachment of the body to the soul as Catholics and most Protestants believe, would it not be strange for Paul to fail to mention it altogether in his discussion of the nature of the resurrection? After all, such a concept is fundamental for understanding what happens to the body and soul at the resurrection. The absence of any reference to the soul clearly indicates that Paul believed in the resurrection of the whole person, and not in the reattachment of the body to the soul.

Meaning of the Resurrection of the Body. The resurrection of the body does not mean the rehabilitation of our present physical bodies, which are often sick and suffering, but the restoration of our whole person. In the Bible the body stands for the whole person. When Paul writes, "We wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23), he simply means the restoration of our total being. To believe in the resurrection/translation of the body means to believe that my human self, the human being that "I" am, will be restored to life again. It means that I will not be someone different from whom I am now. I will be exclusively myself. In short, it means that God has committed Himself to preserving my individuality, personality, and character.

It is the character or personality that we develop in this life that God preserves in His memory and will reunite to the resurrected person. No two characters are the same because no two persons face the same temptations, struggles, defeats, disappointments, victories, and growth in their Christian life. This eliminates the possibility of "duplication" of people at the resurrection, all looking, acting, and thinking alike. Each one of us has a unique character or personality that God preserves and will unite to the resurrected body. This explains the importance of developing a Christian character in this present life, because this will be our personal identity in the world to come.

The preceding survey has shown that the Biblical view of human nature is wholistic, consisting of an indivisible person where the soul is the animating principle of the body. We have found that creation tells us that originally the whole human nature was conditionally immortal. The Fall informs us that the whole human nature became unconditionally mortal. Redemption reassures us that God has made provision for the whole human nature to be morally renewed in this present life and physically restored in the world to come. This is God's glorious plan for our human nature and destiny; a plan

that embraces the creation, redemption and final restoration of the whole human nature as well as the whole planet.

Our next Bible study deals with "**The Biblical View of Death.**" Does the Bible teach that death is the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal body? Or, does the Bible teach that death is the termination of life for the whole person, body and soul? To find answers to these questions, we will search the Scriptures examining all the pertinent passages. This is an important study to unmask the prevailing deception of conscious life after death.

FOOTNOTES

1. To order a copy of *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study of Human Nature and Destiny*, send \$15.00, postpaid, to: Biblical Perspectives, 4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, Michigan 49103.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I, XV, 3 (London, 1949), Vol. 1, pp. 162, 165.
3. Dom Wulstan Mork, *The Biblical Meaning of Man* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1967), p. 34.
4. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1974), p. 10.
5. Norman Snaith, "Justice and Immortality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17, 3, (September 1964), pp. 312-313.

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