



What Happens to  
Us When We Die?





# What Happens to Us When We Die?

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—With References

*What Happens to Us When We Die?*

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*"There exists hope for even a tree. If it gets cut down, it will even sprout again . . . If an able-bodied man dies can he live again?"*

—MOSES, AN ANCIENT PROPHET.

## Is There Life After Death?

**I**N A funeral parlor in New York City, friends and family quietly file by the open casket. They gaze at the body, that of a 17-year-old boy. His friends from school hardly recognize him. Chemotherapy has thinned his hair; cancer has caused him to lose weight. Can this really be their friend? Just months before, he was so full of ideas, of questions, of energy—of life! The heartbroken mother of the boy tries to find hope and solace in the idea that somehow her son still lives. Over and over she tearfully repeats what she has been taught: "Tommy's happier now. God wanted Tommy in heaven with him."

<sup>2</sup> Some 7,000 miles away, in Jamnagar, India, the three sons of a 58-year-old businessman help lay their father's corpse on a funeral pyre. In the bright midmorning sun, the eldest son begins the cremation procedure by lighting the logs of wood with a torch and pouring a sweet-smelling mixture of spices and incense over his father's lifeless body. The crackling of the fire is overpowered by the Brahman's repeated utterances of Sanskrit mantras meaning: "May the soul that never dies continue in its efforts to become one with the ultimate reality."

1-3. How do many seek comfort when they have lost a loved one in death?

<sup>3</sup> As the three brothers observe the cremation, each silently asks himself, "Do I believe in life after death?" Having been educated in different parts of the world, they give different answers. The youngest feels confident that their beloved father will be reincarnated to a life of greater status. The middle brother believes that the dead are in a sense asleep, conscious of nothing at all. The oldest simply tries to accept the reality of death, for he thinks that no one can know for sure what happens to us when we die.

### **One Question, Many Answers**

<sup>4</sup> Is there life after death? is a question that has perplexed mankind for millenniums. "Even theologians are embarrassed when faced with [it]," says Hans Küng, a Catholic scholar. Over the ages, people in every society have pondered the subject, and there is no shortage of proposed answers.

<sup>5</sup> Many nominal Christians believe in heaven and hell. Hindus, on the other hand, believe in reincarnation. Commenting on the Muslim view, Amir Muawiyah, an assistant at an Islamic religious center, says: "We believe there will be a day of judgment after death."

4. What question has distressed mankind for ages?

5-8. What do various religions teach about life after death?

when you go before God, Allah, which will be just like walking into court.” According to Islamic belief, Allah will then assess each one’s life course and consign a person to paradise or to hellfire.

<sup>6</sup> In Sri Lanka, both Buddhists and Catholics leave the doors and windows wide open when a death occurs in their household. An oil lamp is lit, and the casket is placed with the feet of the deceased facing the front door. They believe that these measures facilitate the exit of the spirit, or soul, of the deceased from the house.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Aborigines, says Ronald M. Berndt of the University of Western Australia, believe that “human beings are spiritually indestructible.” Certain African tribes believe that after death ordinary people become ghosts, whereas prominent individuals become ancestor spirits, who will be honored and petitioned as invisible leaders of the community.

<sup>8</sup> In some lands, beliefs regarding supposed souls of the dead are a blend of local tradition and nominal Christianity. For example, among many Catholics and Protestants in West Africa, it is customary to cover mirrors when someone dies so that no one might look and see the dead person’s spirit. Then, 40 days after the death of the loved one, family and friends celebrate the soul’s ascension to heaven.

### **A Common Theme**

<sup>9</sup> Answers to the question about what happens when we die are as diverse as the customs and beliefs of the people giving them. Yet, most religions agree on one fundamental idea: Something inside a person—a soul, a spirit, a ghost—is immortal and continues living after death.

9. 10. On what fundamental belief do most religions agree?

<sup>10</sup> Belief in the immortality of the soul is all but universal in Christendom’s thousands of religions and sects. It is an official doctrine in Judaism too. In Hinduism this belief is the very foundation of the teaching of reincarnation. Muslims believe that the soul comes into being with the body but lives on after the body dies. Other faiths—African animism, Shinto, and even Buddhism—teach variations on this same theme.

<sup>11</sup> Some take the opposite view, that conscious life ends at death. To them, the idea that emotional and intellectual life continues in an impersonal, shadowy soul separate from the body seems beyond reason. The 20th-century Spanish writer and scholar Miguel de Unamuno writes: “To believe in the immortality of the soul is to wish that the soul may be immortal, but to wish it with such force that this volition shall trample reason under foot and pass beyond it.” Among those who refused to believe in personal immortality are the noted ancient philosophers Aristotle and Epicurus, the physician Hippocrates, the Scottish philosopher David Hume, the Arabian scholar Averroës, and India’s first prime minister after independence, Jawaharlal Nehru.

<sup>12</sup> The question is, Do we really have an immortal soul? If the soul actually is not immortal, then how could such a false teaching be an integral part of most of today’s religions? Where did the idea begin? And if the soul actually ceases to exist at death, what hope could there be for the dead?

<sup>13</sup> Can we find truthful and satisfying answers to such questions? Yes! These and other questions will be answered in the following pages. First, let us examine how the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was born.

11. How do some scholars view the idea that the soul is immortal?

12. 13. What important questions arise about the teaching of the immortality of the soul?



*"No subject connected with his psychic life has so engrossed the mind of man as that of his condition after death."*

—*"ENCYCLOPÆDIA OF RELIGION AND ETHICS."*

## Immortality of the Soul *The Birth of the Doctrine*

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**A** 70-YEAR-OLD scholar and teacher is accused of impiety and of corrupting young minds by his teaching. Even though he presents a brilliant defense at his trial, a biased jury finds him guilty and sentences him to death. Just hours before his execution, the aged teacher presents to the pupils gathered around him a series of arguments to affirm that the soul is immortal and that death is not to be feared.

<sup>2</sup> The condemned man is none other than Socrates, renowned Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.E.\* His student Plato recorded these incidents in the essays *Apology* and *Phaedo*. Socrates and Plato are credited with being among the first to advance the idea that the soul is immortal. But they were not the originators of this teaching.

<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, the roots of the idea of human immortality reach into much earlier times. Socrates and Plato, however, polished the concept and transformed it into a philosophical teaching, thus making it more appealing to the cultured classes of their day and beyond.

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\* B.C.E. means "Before the Common Era." C.E. denotes "Common Era," often called A.D., for Anno Domini, meaning "in the year of the Lord."

1-3. How did Socrates and Plato advance the idea that the soul is immortal?

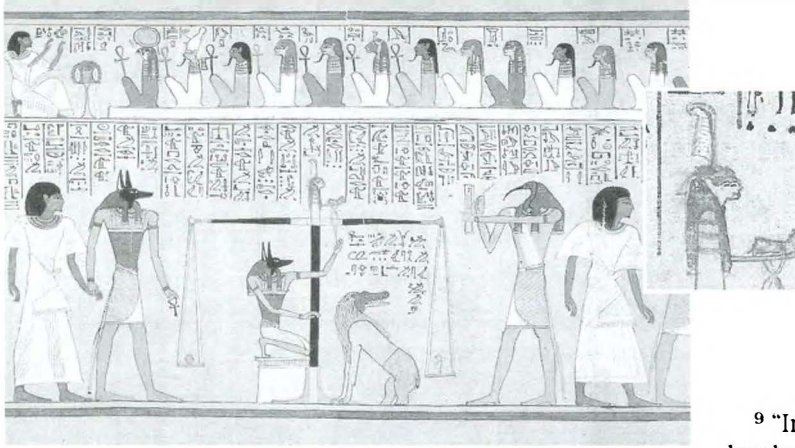
### **From Pythagoras to the Pyramids**

<sup>4</sup> The Greeks prior to Socrates and Plato also believed that the soul lived on after death. Pythagoras, the famous Greek mathematician of the sixth century B.C.E., held that the soul was immortal and subject to transmigration. Before him, Thales of Miletus, thought to be the earliest known Greek philosopher, felt that an immortal soul existed not only in men, animals, and plants but also in such objects as magnets, since they can move iron. The ancient Greeks claimed that the souls of the dead were ferried across the river Styx to a vast underground realm called the netherworld. There, judges sentenced the souls either to torment in a high-walled prison or to bliss in Elysium.

<sup>5</sup> In Iran, or Persia, to the east, a prophet named Zoroaster appeared on the scene in the seventh century B.C.E. He introduced a way of worship that came to be known as Zoroastrianism. This was the religion of the Persian Empire, which dominated the world scene before Greece became a major power. The Zoroastrian scriptures say: "In Immortality shall the soul of the Righteous be ever in Joy, but in torment the soul of the Liar shall surely be.

4. Before Socrates, what were the Greek views of the Hereafter?

5. 6. How did the Persians regard the soul?



*Egyptian view of the souls in the underworld*

And these Laws hath Ahura Mazda [meaning, "a wise god"] ordained through His sovereign authority."

<sup>6</sup> The teaching of the immortality of the soul was also a part of the pre-Zoroastrian Iranian religion. Ancient tribes of Iran, for example, cared for the souls of the departed by offering them food and clothing to benefit them in the underworld.

<sup>7</sup> Belief in life after death was central to Egyptian religion. The Egyptians held that the soul of the dead person would be judged by Osiris, the chief god of the underworld. For example, a papyrus document claimed to be from the 14th century B.C.E. shows Anubis, god of the dead, leading the soul of the scribe Hunefer before Osiris. On a pair of scales, the heart of the scribe, representing his conscience, is weighed against the feather that the goddess of truth and justice wears on her head. Thoth, another god, records the results. Since Hunefer's heart is not heavy with guilt, it weighs less than the feather, and Hunefer is allowed to enter the realm of Osiris and receive immortality. The papyrus also shows a female monster standing by the scales, ready to devour the deceased if the heart fails the test. The Egyptians also mummified their dead and preserved the bodies of pharaohs in impressive pyramids, since they thought that the sur-

7. 8. What did the ancient Egyptians believe about the soul's surviving the death of the body?

vival of the soul depended on preserving the body.

<sup>8</sup> Various ancient civilizations, then, held one teaching in common—the immortality of the soul. Did they get this teaching from the same source?

### **The Point of Origin**

<sup>9</sup> "In the ancient world," says the book *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, "Egypt, Persia, and Greece felt the influence of the Babylonian religion." This book goes on to explain: "In view of the early contact between Egypt and Babylonia, as revealed by the El-Amarna tablets, there were certainly abundant opportunities for the infusion of Babylonian views and customs into Egyptian cults. In Persia, the Mithra cult reveals the unmistakable influence of Babylonian conceptions . . . The strong admixture of Semitic elements both in early Greek mythology and in Grecian cults is now so generally admitted by scholars as to require no further comment. These Semitic elements are to a large extent more specifically Babylonian."\*

<sup>10</sup> But does not the Babylonian view of what happens after death differ considerably from that of the Egyptians, the Persians, and the Greeks? Consider, for example, the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its aging hero, Gilgamesh, haunted by the reality of death, sets out in search of immortality but fails to find it. A wine maiden he meets during his journey even encourages him to make the most of this life, for he will not find the unending life he seeks. The message of the whole epic is that death is in-

\* El-Amarna is the site of ruins of the Egyptian city Akhetaton, claimed to have been built in the 14th century B.C.E.

9. Which religion influenced the ancient world of Egypt, Persia, and Greece?

10. 11. What was the Babylonian view of life after death?

*Socrates argued  
that the soul is  
immortal*



evitable and the hope of immortality is an illusion. Would this indicate that the Babylonians did not believe in the Hereafter?

<sup>11</sup> Professor Morris Jastrow, Jr., of the University of Pennsylvania, U.S.A., wrote: "Neither the people nor the leaders of religious thought [of Babylonia] ever faced the possibility of the total annihilation of what once was called into existence. Death [in their view] was a passage to another kind of life, and the denial of immortality merely emphasized the impossibility of escaping the change in existence brought about by death." Yes, the Babylonians also believed that life of some kind, in some form, continued after death. They expressed this by burying objects with the dead for their use in the Hereafter.

<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the teaching of the immortality of the soul goes back to ancient Babylon. According to the Bible, a book bearing the stamp of accurate history, the city of Babel, or Babylon, was founded by Nimrod, a great-grandson of Noah.\* After the global Flood in Noah's day,

\* See *The Bible—God's Word or Man's?*, pages 37-54, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.

12-14. (a) After the Flood, what was the birthplace of the teaching of the immortality of the soul? (b) How did the doctrine spread across the earth?

there was only one language and one religion. By founding the city and constructing a tower there, Nimrod started another religion. The Bible record shows that after the confusion of languages at Babel, the unsuccessful tower builders scattered and made new beginnings, taking along their religion. (Genesis 10:6-10; 11:4-9) Babylonish religious teachings thus spread across the face of the earth.

<sup>13</sup> Tradition has it that Nimrod died a violent death. After his death the Babylonians reasonably would have been inclined to hold him in high regard as the founder, builder, and first king of their city. Since the god Marduk (Merodach) was regarded as the founder of Babylon, some scholars have suggested that Marduk represents the deified Nimrod. If this is so, then the idea that a person has a soul that survives death must have been current at least by the time of Nimrod's death. In any case, the pages of history reveal that following the Flood, the birthplace of the teaching of the immortality of the soul was Babel, or Babylon.

<sup>14</sup> How, though, did the doctrine become central to most religions of our time? The next section will examine its entry into Eastern religions.



*"I always thought that the immortality of the soul was a universal truth that everyone accepted. So I was really surprised to learn that some great minds both of the East and of the West have passionately argued against the belief. Now I wonder how the idea of immortality came into Hindu consciousness."*

—A UNIVERSITY STUDENT WHO WAS RAISED A HINDU.

## The Idea Enters Eastern Religions

**H**OW did the idea that man has a soul that is immortal enter Hinduism and other Eastern religions? The question is of interest even to those in the West who may not be familiar with these religions, since the belief affects everyone's view of the future. Because the teaching of human immortality is a common denominator in most religions today, knowing how the concept developed can indeed promote better understanding and communication.

<sup>2</sup> Ninian Smart, a professor of religious studies at the University of Lancaster in Britain, observes: "The most important centre of religious influence in Asia has been India. This is not merely because India itself has given birth to a number of faiths—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.—but because one of these, Buddhism, came to influence profoundly the culture of virtually the whole of East Asia." Many cultures influenced in this way "still regard India as their spiritual homeland," says Hindu scholar Nikhilananda. How, then, did this teaching of immortality make inroads into India and other parts of Asia?

1. Why is knowledge of the development and spread of the doctrine of human immortality in various religions of interest to us?
2. Why has India been a noteworthy source of religious influence in Asia?

### **Hinduism's Teaching of Reincarnation**

<sup>3</sup> In the sixth century B.C.E., while Pythagoras and his followers in Greece were advocating the theory of transmigration of souls, Hindu sages living along the banks of the Indus and Ganges rivers in India were developing the same concept. The simultaneous appearance of this belief "in the Greek world and in India can hardly have been fortuitous," says historian Arnold Toynbee. "One possible common source [of influence]," Toynbee points out, "is the Eurasian nomad society, which, in the 8th and 7th centuries B.C., had descended upon India, South-Western Asia, the steppe country along the north shore of the Black Sea, and the Balkan and Anatolian peninsulas." The migrating Eurasian tribes evidently carried with them to India the idea of transmigration.

<sup>4</sup> Hinduism had begun in India much earlier, with the arrival of the Aryans about 1500 B.C.E. From the very start, Hinduism held the belief that the soul was different from the body and that the soul survived death. Hindus thus practiced ancestor worship and laid out food for the souls of their dead to con-

3. According to a historian, by whom was the idea of transmigration of souls possibly taken to India?
4. Why did the concept of transmigration of souls appeal to Hindu sages?



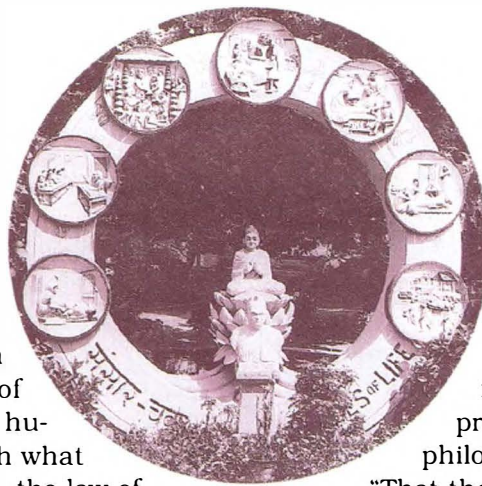
sume. Centuries later when the idea of the transmigration of souls reached India, it must have appealed to the Hindu sages grappling with the universal problem of evil and suffering among humans. Combining this with what is called the law of Karma, the law of cause and effect, Hindu sages developed the theory of reincarnation whereby merits and demerits in one life are rewarded or punished in the next.

<sup>5</sup> But there was one other concept that influenced Hinduism's teaching about the soul. "It seems to be true that at the very time when the theory of transmigration and *karma* was formed, or even earlier," says the *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, "another concept . . . was gradually taking shape in a small intellectual circle in N. India—the philosophic concept of the *Brahman-Ātman* [the supreme and eternal Brahman, the ultimate reality]." This idea was combined with the theory of reincarnation to define the ultimate goal of Hindus—liberation from the cycle of transmigration in order to be one with the ultimate reality. This, Hindus believe, is achieved by striving for socially acceptable behavior and special Hindu knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Hindu wise men thus shaped the idea of the transmigration of souls into the doctrine of reincarnation by combining it with the law of Karma and the concept of Brahman. Octavio Paz, a Nobel Prize winning poet and a former Mexican ambassador to India, writes: "As Hinduism spread, so did an idea . . . that is pivotal to Brahmanism, Buddhism, and oth-

5. According to Hinduism, what is the ultimate goal of the soul?

6. 7. What is the belief of present-day Hinduism about the Hereafter?



*Reincarnation is the mainstay of Hinduism*

er Asian religions: metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls across successive existences."

<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of reincarnation is the mainstay of present-day Hinduism. Hindu philosopher Nikhilananda says: "That the attainment of immortality is not the prerogative of a chosen few, but the birthright of all, is the conviction of every good Hindu."

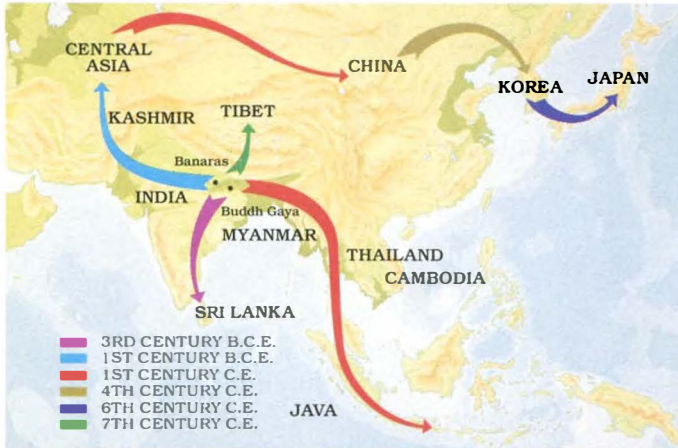
### **The Cycle of Rebirth in Buddhism**

<sup>8</sup> Buddhism was founded in India about 500 B.C.E. According to Buddhist tradition, an Indian prince by the name of Siddhārtha Gautama, who came to be known as Buddha after receiving enlightenment, founded Buddhism. Since it sprang from Hinduism, its teachings are in some ways similar to those of Hinduism. According to Buddhism, existence is a continuous cycle of rebirth and death, and as in Hinduism, each individual's status in his current life is defined by the deeds of his previous life.

<sup>9</sup> But Buddhism does not define existence in terms of a personal soul that survives death. "[Buddha] saw in the human psyche only a fleeting series of discontinuous psychological states, which are held together only by desire," observed Arnold Toynbee. Yet, Buddha believed that something—some state or force—is passed on from one life to another. Dr. Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist scholar, explains:

<sup>10</sup> "A being is nothing but a combination of physical and mental forces or energies. What

8-10. (a) How does Buddhism define existence? (b) How does a Buddhist scholar explain rebirth?



*Buddhism influenced all of East Asia*

we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical body. Do all these forces and energies stop altogether with the non-functioning of the body? Buddhism says 'No.' Will, volition, desire, thirst to exist, to continue, to become more and more, is a tremendous force that moves whole lives, whole existences, that even moves the whole world. This is the greatest force, the greatest energy in the world. According to Buddhism, this force does not stop with the non-functioning of the body, which is death; but it continues manifesting itself in another form, producing re-existence which is called rebirth."

<sup>11</sup> The Buddhist view of the Hereafter is this: Existence is everlasting unless the individual attains the final goal of Nirvana, liberation from the cycle of rebirths. Nirvana is a state neither of eternal bliss nor of becoming one with the ultimate reality. It is simply a state of nonexistence—the "deathless place" beyond individual existence. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "Nirvana" as "a place or state of oblivion to care, pain, or external reality." Rather than seeking immortality, Buddhists are encouraged to transcend it by achieving Nirvana.

11. What is the Buddhist view of the Hereafter?

<sup>12</sup> As it spread to various places in Asia, Buddhism modified its teachings to accommodate local beliefs. For example, Mahayana Buddhism, the form that is dominant in China and Japan, holds a belief in celestial bodhisattvas, or future Buddhas. Bodhisattvas put off their Nirvana for countless lives in order to serve others and help them attain it. Thus one can choose to continue in the cycle of rebirth even after attaining Nirvana.

<sup>13</sup> Another adjustment that became particularly influential in China and Japan is the doctrine of the Pure Land to the West, created by Buddha Amitabha, or Amida. Those calling on the name of Buddha in faith are reborn into the Pure Land, or paradise, where conditions are more conducive to attaining the final enlightenment. What has developed from this teaching? Professor Smart, mentioned earlier, explains: "Not unnaturally, the splendours of paradise, vividly described in some of the Mahayana scriptures, came to replace nirvana in the popular imagination as the supreme goal."

<sup>14</sup> Tibetan Buddhism incorporates other local elements. For example, the Tibetan book of the dead describes the fate of an individual in the intermediate state before being reborn. The dead are said to be exposed to the bright light of the ultimate reality, and those who are unable to bear the light do not gain liberation but are reborn. Clearly, Buddhism in its various forms conveys the idea of immortality.

### **Ancestor Worship in Japan's Shinto**

<sup>15</sup> Religion existed in Japan before the arrival of Buddhism in the sixth century C.E. It

12-14. How do various forms of Buddhism convey the idea of immortality?

15-17. (a) How did the worship of ancestral spirits develop in Shinto? (b) How is the belief in immortality of the soul fundamental to Shinto?

was a religion without a name, and it consisted of beliefs associated with morals and customs of the people. With the introduction of Buddhism, however, the need arose to distinguish the Japanese religion from the foreign one. And so the designation "Shinto," meaning "the way of the gods," sprang up.

<sup>16</sup> What belief did the original Shinto hold about the Hereafter? With the advent of the wetland cultivation of rice, "wetland agriculture necessitated well-organized and stable communities," explains the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. "and agricultural rites—which later played such an important role in Shintō—were developed." Fear of departed souls led these ancient people to conceive rites of appeasing them. This developed into a worship of ancestral spirits.

<sup>17</sup> According to Shinto belief, a "departed" soul still has its personality but is stained because of death. When the bereaved perform memorial rites, the soul is purified to the point of removing all malice, and it takes on a peaceful and benevolent character. In time, the ancestral spirit rises to the position of an ancestral deity, or guardian. As it coexisted with Buddhism, Shinto incorporated certain Buddhist teachings, including the doctrine of paradise. Thus, we find that belief in immortality is fundamental to Shinto.

### **Immortality in Taoism, Ancestor Worship in Confucianism**

<sup>18</sup> Taoism was founded by Lao-tzu, who is said to have lived in China in the sixth century B.C.E. The goal in life, according to Taoism, is to harmonize human activity with Tao—the way of nature. Taoist thinking concerning immortality can be summed up this way: Tao is the governing principle of the universe. Tao has no beginning and no end. By living in accord with Tao, an individual participates in it and becomes eternal.

<sup>19</sup> In their attempt to be at one with nature, Taoists in time became especially interested in its agelessness

18. What is Taoist thinking concerning immortality?

19-21. Taoist speculations led to what endeavors?

壽陵筆  
庚午年  
源盡邱壑美  
歸山深淺去

*By living in harmony  
with nature, a Taoist  
tries to become eternal*



and resilience. They speculated that perhaps by living in harmony with Tao, or nature's way, one could somehow tap into the secrets of nature and become immune to physical harm, disease, and even death.

<sup>20</sup> Taoists started to experiment with meditation, breathing exercises, and diet, which supposedly could delay bodily decay and death. Soon legends began to circulate about immortals who could fly on clouds and appear and disappear at will and who lived on sacred mountains or remote islands for countless years, sustained by dew or magical fruits. Chinese history reports that in 219 B.C.E., the emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti sent a fleet of ships with 3,000 boys and girls to find the legendary island of P'eng-lai, the abode of the immortals, in order to bring back the herb of immortality. Needless to say, they did not return with the elixir.

<sup>21</sup> The quest for eternal life led Taoists to experiment with concocting immortality pills by alchemy. In the Taoist view, life results when the opposing yin and yang (female and male) forces combine. Thus, by fusing lead (dark, or yin) and mercury (bright, or yang), the alchemists were imitating the process of nature, and they thought that the product would be an immortality pill.

<sup>22</sup> By the seventh century C.E., Buddhism made inroads into Chinese religious life. The result was an amalgam embracing elements of Buddhism, spiritism, and ancestor worship. "Both Buddhism and Taoism," says Professor Smart, "gave shape and substance

22. What resulted from the Buddhist influence on Chinese religious life?

to beliefs about an after-life which were rather sketchy in ancient Chinese ancestor-worship."

<sup>23</sup> Confucius, China's other prominent sage of the sixth century B.C.E., whose philosophy became the basis for Confucianism, did not comment extensively on the Hereafter. Rather, he stressed the importance of moral goodness and socially acceptable behavior. But he had a favorable attitude toward ancestor worship and placed great emphasis on the observance of the rites and ceremonies relating to the spirits of departed ancestors.



*Confucius had a favorable attitude toward ancestor worship*

### **Other Eastern Religions**

<sup>24</sup> Jainism was founded in India in the sixth century B.C.E. Its founder, Mahāvīra, taught that all living things have eternal souls and that salvation of the soul from the bondage of Karma is possible only through extreme self-denial and self-discipline and a rigid application of nonviolence toward all creatures. Jains hold these

beliefs to this day.

<sup>25</sup> India is also the birthplace of Sikhism, a religion practiced by 19 million people. This religion had its start in the 16th century when Guru Nānak decided to fuse the best of Hinduism and Islam and form a united religion. Sikhism adopted the Hindu beliefs of immortality of the soul, reincarnation, and Karma.

<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the belief that life continues after the body dies is an integral part of most Eastern religions. What, though, of Christendom, Judaism, and Islam?

23. What was Confucius' position regarding ancestor worship?

24. What does Jainism teach about the soul?

25. 26. What Hindu beliefs are also found in Sikhism?



*“Religion is among other things a way of reconciling people to the fact that some day they must die, whether by the promise of a better life beyond the grave, rebirth, or both.”*

—GERHARD HERM, GERMAN AUTHOR.

## The Idea Enters Judaism, Christendom, and Islam

**I**N MAKING a promise of an afterlife, virtually every religion depends on the belief that a human has a soul that is immortal and that upon death journeys to another realm or transmigrates to another creature. As noted in the preceding section, the belief in human immortality has been an integral part of Eastern religions from their inception. But what about Judaism, Christendom, and Islam? How did the teaching become central to these faiths?

### **Judaism Absorbs Greek Concepts**

<sup>2</sup> The roots of Judaism go back some 4,000 years to Abraham. The sacred Hebrew writings began to be written in the 16th century B.C.E. and were completed by the time Socrates and Plato gave shape to the theory of the immortality of the soul. Did these Scriptures teach the immortality of the soul?

<sup>3</sup> Answers the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*: “Only in the post-biblical period, did a clear and firm belief in the immortality of the soul take hold . . . and become one of the cornerstones of the Jewish and Christian faiths.” It also states: “The personality was considered as a

1. Most religions base their promise of life after death on what basic belief?
2. 3. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, did the sacred Hebrew writings teach the immortality of the soul?

whole in the biblical period. Thus the soul was not sharply distinguished from the body.” The early Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, and this “is to be distinguished from the belief in . . . the immortality of the soul,” points out that encyclopedia.

<sup>4</sup> How, then, did the doctrine become “one of the cornerstones” of Judaism? History provides the answer. In 332 B.C.E., Alexander the Great took much of the Middle East in lightning-quick conquest. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, the Jews welcomed him with open arms. According to first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, they even showed him the prophecy from the book of Daniel, written over 200 years earlier, that clearly described Alexander’s conquests in the role of “the king of Greece.” (Daniel 8:5-8, 21) Alexander’s successors continued his plan of Hellenization, imbuing all parts of the empire with Greek language, culture, and philosophy. A blending of the two cultures—the Greek and the Jewish—was inevitable.

<sup>5</sup> Early in the third century B.C.E., the first translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, called the *Septuagint*, was begun.

4-6. How did the doctrine of the immortality of the soul become “one of the cornerstones” of Judaism?

*The conquest by Alexander the Great led to the blending of the Greek and the Jewish cultures*



Through it many Gentiles came to have respect for and familiarity with the Jewish religion, some even converting. Jews, on the other hand, were becoming conversant with Greek thought, and some became philosophers, something entirely new to them. Philo of Alexandria, of the first century C.E., was one such Jewish philosopher.

<sup>6</sup> Philo revered Plato and endeavored to explain Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy. "By creating a unique synthesis of Platonic philosophy and biblical tradition," says the book *Heaven—A History*, "Philo paved the way for later Christian [as well as Jewish] thinkers." And what was Philo's belief about the soul? The book continues: "For him, death restores the soul to its original, pre-birth state. Since the soul belongs to the spiritual world, life in the body becomes nothing but a brief, often unfortunate, episode." Other Jewish thinkers who believed in the immortality of the soul include Isaac Israeli, the well-known 10th-century Jewish physician, and Moses Mendelssohn, a German-Jewish philosopher of the 18th century.

<sup>7</sup> A book that has also deeply influenced Jewish thought and life is the Talmud—the written summary of the so-called oral law, with later commentaries and explanations of this law, compiled by rabbis from the second century C.E. into the Middle Ages. "The rabbis of the Talmud," says the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "believed in the continued existence of the soul after death." The Talmud even speaks of the dead contacting the living, "Probably on ac-

7. 8. (a) How does the Talmud depict the soul? (b) What does later Jewish mystical literature say about the soul?

count of the influence of Platonism," says the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. "[rabbis] believed in the pre-existence of souls."

<sup>8</sup> Later Jewish mystical literature, the *Ca-bala*, even goes as far as to teach reincarnation. Regarding this belief, *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia* states: "The idea seems to have originated in India. . . . In Kabbalah it first emerges in the book *Bahir*, and then, from the *Zohar* onward, was commonly accepted by mystics, playing an important role in Hasidic belief and literature." In Israel today, reincarnation is widely accepted as a Jewish teaching.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of the immortality of the soul, therefore, entered Judaism through the influence of Greek philosophy, and the concept is today accepted by most of its factions. What can be said about the entry of the teaching into Christendom?

#### **Christendom Adopts Plato's Thoughts**

<sup>10</sup> Genuine Christianity began with Christ Jesus. Concerning Jesus, Miguel de Unamuno, a prominent 20th-century Spanish scholar, wrote: "He believed rather in the resurrection of the flesh, according to the Jewish manner, not in the immortality of the soul, according to the [Greek] Platonic manner. . . . The proofs of this can be seen in any honest book of interpretation." He concluded: "The immortality of the soul . . . is a pagan philosophical dogma."

<sup>11</sup> When and how did this "pagan philosophical dogma" infiltrate Christianity? The *New Encyclopaedia Britannica* points out: "From the middle of the 2nd century AD Christians who had some training in Greek philosophy began to feel the need to express their faith in its terms, both for their own intellectual satis-

9. What is the stance of most factions of today's Judaism as to the immortality of the soul?

10. What did a prominent Spanish scholar conclude regarding Jesus' belief in the immortality of the soul?

11. When did Greek philosophy begin making inroads into Christianity?

faction and in order to convert educated pagans. The philosophy that suited them best was Platonism.”

<sup>12</sup> Two such early philosophers wielded a great deal of influence on Christendom’s doctrines. One was Origen of Alexandria (c. 185-254 C.E.), and the other, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.). Regarding them, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: “Only with Origen in the East and St. Augustine in the West was the soul established as a spiritual substance and a philosophical concept formed of its nature.” On what basis did Origen and Augustine form their concepts about the soul?

<sup>13</sup> Origen was a pupil of Clement of Alexandria, who was “the first of the Fathers explicitly to borrow from the Greek tradition on the soul.” says the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Plato’s ideas about the soul must have influenced Origen deeply. “[Origen] built into Christian doctrine the whole cosmic drama of the soul, which he took from Plato,” noted theologian Werner Jaeger in *The Harvard Theological Review*.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine is viewed by some in Christendom as the greatest thinker of antiquity. Before converting to “Christianity” at the age of 33, Augustine had intense interest in philosophy and had become a Neoplatonist.\* Upon his conversion, he remained Neoplatonic in his thinking. “His mind was the crucible in which the religion of the New Testament was most completely fused with the Platonic tradition of Greek philosophy,” says *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* admits that Augustine’s “doctrine [of the soul], which became standard in the West until the late 12th century, owed much . . . to Neoplatonism.”

\* An adherent of Neoplatonism, a new version of Plato’s philosophy developed by Plotinus in third-century Rome.

12-14. What roles did Origen and Augustine play in fusing Platonic philosophy with Christianity?

<sup>15</sup> In the 13th century, the teachings of Aristotle were gaining in popularity in Europe, largely because of the availability in Latin of the works of Arab scholars who had commented extensively on Aristotle’s writings. A Catholic scholar named Thomas Aquinas was deeply impressed by Aristotelian thinking. Because of Aquinas’ writings, Aristotle’s views wielded a greater influence on the church’s teaching than Plato’s did. This trend, however, did not affect the teaching about the immortality of the soul.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle taught that the soul was inseparably connected with the body and did not continue individual existence after death and that if anything eternal existed in man, it was abstract, nonpersonal intellect. This way of looking at the soul was not in harmony with the church’s belief of personal souls surviving death. Therefore, Aquinas modified Aristotle’s view of the soul, asserting that the immortality of the soul can be proved by reason. Thus, the belief of the church in the immortality of the soul remained intact.

<sup>17</sup> During the 14th and 15th centuries, the early part of the Renaissance, there was a revival of interest in Plato. The famous Medici family in Italy even helped establish an

*Origen, top, and Augustine tried to fuse Platonic philosophy with Christianity*



15. 16. Did 13th-century interest in Aristotle’s teachings alter the stance of the church on the teaching of the immortality of the soul?

17. 18. (a) Did the Reformation of the 16th century introduce a reform in the teaching about the soul? (b) What is the position of most denominations of Christendom on the immortality of the soul?

academy in Florence to promote the study of Plato's philosophy. During the 16th and 17th centuries, interest in Aristotle waned. And the Reformation of the 16th century did not introduce a reform in the teaching about the soul. Although Protestant Reformers took issue with the teaching of purgatory, they accepted the idea of eternal punishment or reward.

<sup>18</sup> The teaching of the immortality of the soul thus prevails in most denominations of Christendom. Noting this, an American scholar wrote: "Religion, in fact, for the great majority of our own race, means immortality, and nothing else. God is the producer of immortality."

### Immortality and Islam

<sup>19</sup> Islam began with Muḥammad's call to be a prophet when he was about 40 years old. It is generally believed by Muslims that revelations came to him during a period of some 20 to 23 years, from about 610 C.E. to his death in 632 C.E. These revelations are recorded in the Koran, the Muslim holy book. By the time Islam came into existence, Judaism and Christendom were infiltrated with the Platonic concept of the soul.

<sup>20</sup> Muslims believe that their faith is the culmination of the revelations given to the faithful Hebrews and Christians of old. The Koran cites both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures. But on the teaching of the immortality of the soul, the Koran diverges from these writings. The Koran teaches that man has a soul that goes on living after death. It also speaks of resurrection of the dead, a judgment day, and the final destiny of the soul—either life in a heav-

19. When was Islam founded, and by whom?  
20. 21. What do Muslims believe about the Hereafter?



*Avicenna, top, declared that the personal soul is immortal. Averroës argued against that view*



enly garden of paradise or punishment in a burning hell.

<sup>21</sup> Muslims hold that a dead person's soul goes to the *Barzakh*, or "Partition," "the place or state in which people will be after death and before Judgment." (Surah 23:99, 100, *The Holy Qur-an*, footnote) The soul is conscious, there experiencing what is termed the "Chastisement of the Tomb" if the person had been wicked or enjoying happiness if he had been faithful. But the faithful ones must also experience some torment because of their few sins committed while alive. On the judgment day, each faces his eternal destiny, which ends that intermediate state.

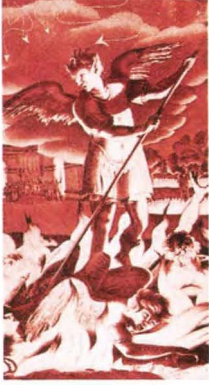
<sup>22</sup> The idea of the immortality of the soul in Judaism and Christendom appeared because of Platonic influence, but the concept was built into Islam from its beginning. This is not to say that Arab scholars have not tried to synthesize Islamic teachings and Greek philosophy. The Arab

world, in fact, was greatly influenced by Aristotle's work. And noted Arab scholars, such as Avicenna and Averroës, expounded and built on Aristotelian thinking. In their attempts to harmonize Greek thought with the Muslim teaching about the soul, however, they came up with differing theories. For example, Avicenna declared that the personal soul is immortal. Averroës, on the other hand, argued against that view. Regardless of these viewpoints, the immortality of the soul remains the belief of Muslims.

<sup>23</sup> Clearly, then, Judaism, Christendom, and Islam all teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

22. What differing theories regarding the soul's destiny did some Arab philosophers present?  
23. Where do Judaism, Christendom, and Islam stand on the issue of the immortality of the soul?





*“The theory of everlasting suffering is inconsistent with belief in God’s love for created things. . . . To believe in the eternal punishment of the soul for the mistakes of a few years, without giving it a chance for correction, is to go against all the dictates of reason.”*

—NIKHILANANDA, HINDU PHILOSOPHER.

## Where to Turn for Answers

**L**IKE the Hindu philosopher Nikhilananda, many today are uncomfortable with the teaching of eternal torment. By the same token, others have difficulty understanding such concepts as the achieving of Nirvana and being at one with Tao.

<sup>2</sup> Yet, because of the idea that the soul is immortal, religions of both the East and the West have developed a bewildering kaleidoscope of beliefs about the Hereafter. Is it possible to know the truth about what happens to us when we die? Is the soul really immortal? Where can we turn for answers?

### Science and Philosophy

<sup>3</sup> Does science or the scientific method of investigation hold the answers to questions pertaining to the Hereafter? Based on recent accounts of near-death or ‘out of body’ experiences, some researchers have tried to make observations about life after death. Reviewing some of their claims in his lecture “Death as Entry Into Light?,” Catholic theologian Hans Küng concluded: “Experiences of this kind prove nothing about a possible life after death: it is a question here of the last five minutes *before* death and not of an eternal

1. 2. In view of the variety of beliefs about the Hereafter, what questions arise?

3. Does science or the scientific method of investigation hold answers to the questions concerning life after death?

life *after* death.” He added: “The question of a possible life after death is of immense importance for life before death. It requires an answer which must be sought elsewhere if it cannot be given by medicine.”

<sup>4</sup> What about philosophy? Can it help us find the answers among the many possibilities of an afterlife that are offered by various religions? Philosophical exploration includes “speculative activity,” says 20th-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell. Philosophy, according to *The World Book Encyclopedia*, is “a form of inquiry—a process of analysis, criticism, interpretation, and speculation.” On the topic of a Hereafter, philosophical speculations have varied from calling immortality mere wishful thinking to proclaiming it a birthright of every human.

### A Unique Source of Answers

<sup>5</sup> There is, however, a book that contains truthful answers to important questions about life and death. It is the oldest book ever written, parts of it being composed some 3,500 years ago. The first part of this book was written a few centuries before the earliest hymns of the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, were formulated and about a thousand years

4. Can philosophy help us find the answers among the many possibilities of an afterlife that are offered by various religions?

5. What is the oldest book ever written?



*A book that  
gives reliable and  
satisfying answers*

*The oldest book ever written*

before Buddha, Mahāvira, and Confucius walked the earth. This book was completed in 98 C.E., more than 500 years before Muḥammad founded Islam. This unique source of superior wisdom is the Bible.\*

<sup>6</sup> The Bible contains the most accurate ancient history of any book in existence. The history recorded in the Bible goes back to the beginning of the human family and explains how we came to be here on earth. It even takes us back to the time before humans were created. Such a book can indeed give us insight into how man was made and what the soul is.

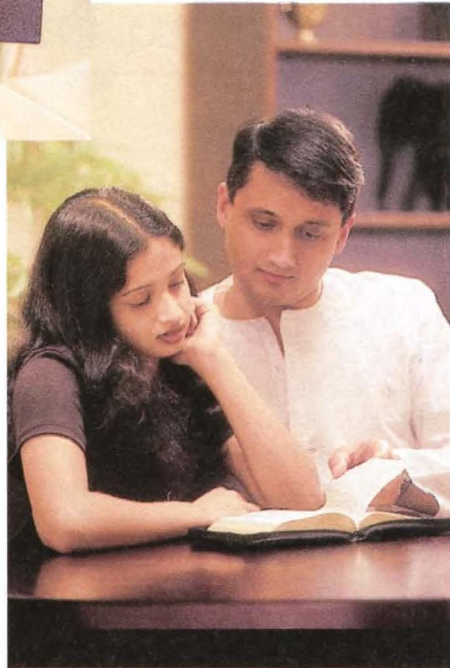
<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the Bible is a book of prophecies that have had unerring fulfillment. For example, it foretold the rise and fall of the Medo-Persian and Grecian empires in great detail. These words were so accurate that some critics tried, in vain, to prove that they were written after the events took place. (Daniel 8:1-7, 20-22) Some prophecies recorded in the Bible are being fulfilled in detail

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\* See the brochure *A Book for All People*, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.

6. Why can we expect the Bible to tell us what the soul is?

7. 8. Why can we confidently turn to the Bible for truthful and satisfying answers about what happens when we die?

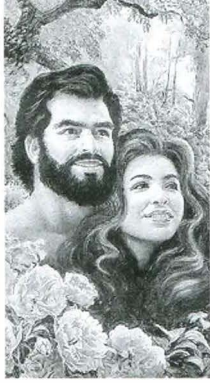


in our very own time.\*—Matthew, chapter 24; Mark, chapter 13; Luke, chapter 21; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 13.

<sup>8</sup> No human, however intelligent, could so accurately predict future events. Only the all-powerful and all-wise Creator of the universe could. (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:20, 21) The Bible is indeed a book from God. Surely, such a book can give us truthful and satisfying answers about what happens to us when we die. Let us first see what it has to say about the soul.

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\* See *The Bible—God's Word or Man's?*, published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc.



“The man came to be a living soul.”  
—GENESIS 2:7.

## The Soul According to the Bible

**A**S WE have seen, beliefs about the soul are many and varied. Even among those who claim to base their beliefs on the Bible, there are differing ideas about what the soul is and what happens to it when we die. But what does the Bible really teach about the soul? To find out, we need to examine the meanings of the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated “soul” in the Bible.

### “Soul” as a Living Creature

<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *ne’phesh*, and it occurs 754 times in the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament). What does *ne’phesh* mean? According to *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, it “usually refers to the entire living being, to the whole individual.”

<sup>3</sup> For example, Genesis 2:7 states: “Jehovah God proceeded to form the man out of dust from the ground and to blow into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man came to be a living soul.” Note that Adam did not *have* a soul; he *was* a soul—just as someone who *becomes* a doctor is a doctor. The word “soul,” then, can describe a whole person.

1. What do we need to examine in order to determine what the Bible teaches about the soul?
2. 3. (a) What word is translated “soul” in the Hebrew Scriptures, and what is the basic meaning of this word? (b) How does Genesis 2:7 confirm that the word “soul” can denote a whole person?

<sup>4</sup> This understanding is supported throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, where we find such phrases as “in case a soul sins” (Leviticus 5:1), “any soul that will do any sort of work” (Leviticus 23:30), “in case a man is found kidnapping a soul” (Deuteronomy 24:7), “his soul got to be impatient” (Judges 16:16), “how long will you men keep irritating my soul?” (Job 19:2), and “my soul has been sleepless from grief.” —Psalm 119:28.

<sup>5</sup> There is no indication in these passages that the soul is some shadowy entity that lives on after death. “To say in our terms that the ‘soul’ of the loved one has departed to be with the Lord or to speak of the ‘immortal soul’ would simply not be understandable in the culture of the OT [Old Testament],” says *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*.

<sup>6</sup> The word translated “soul” more than a hundred times in the Christian Greek Scriptures (commonly called the New Testament) is *psy-khe’*. Like *ne’phesh*, this word often refers to a whole person. For example, consider the following statements: “My soul is troubled.” (John 12:27) “Fear began to fall upon every soul.” (Acts 2:43) “Let every soul

4. 5. (a) Give examples showing that the word “soul” refers to a whole person. (b) How does *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion* support the understanding that a person is a soul?
6. 7. What word is translated “soul” in the Christian Greek Scriptures, and what is the basic meaning of this word?



*They are all souls*

be in subjection to the superior authorities.” (Romans 13:1) “Speak consolingly to the depressed souls.” (1 Thessalonians 5:14) “A few people, that is, eight souls, were carried safely through the water.”—1 Peter 3:20.

<sup>7</sup> *Psy-khe'*, like *ne'phesh*, clearly refers to the whole person. According to scholar Nigel Turner, this word “signifies what is characteristically human, the self, the material body having God’s *ruah* [spirit] breathed into it. . . . The emphasis is on the whole self.”

<sup>8</sup> In the Bible the word “soul” applies not only to humans but also to animals. For example, in describing the creation of sea creatures, Genesis 1:20 says that God commanded: “Let the waters swarm forth a swarm of living souls.” And on the next creative day, God said: “Let the earth put forth living souls according to their kinds, domestic animal and moving animal and wild beast of the earth according to its kind.” (Genesis 1:24; compare Numbers 31:28.) Hence, “soul” can refer to a living creature, whether human or animal.

### “Soul” as the Life of a Creature

<sup>9</sup> At times, the word “soul” refers to the life that a person or an animal enjoys. This does not alter the Bible’s definition of the soul as a person or an animal. To illustrate: We say that

someone is alive, meaning that he is a living person. We might also say that he *possesses* life. In the same way, a living person is a soul. Yet, while he is alive, “soul” may be spoken of as something that he *possesses*.

<sup>10</sup> For example, God told Moses: “All the men who were hunting for your soul are dead.” (Exodus 4:19) Clearly, Moses’ enemies were seeking to take his life. Similar usage of the word “soul” is seen in the following statements. “We became very much afraid for our souls.” (Joshua 9:24) “They kept fleeing for their soul.” (2 Kings 7:7) “The righteous one is caring for the soul of his domestic animal.” (Proverbs 12:10) “The Son of man came . . . to give his soul a ransom in exchange for many.” (Matthew 20:28) “He came quite near to death, exposing his soul to danger.” (Philippians 2:30) In each case, the word “soul” means “life.”\*

<sup>11</sup> So the word “soul” as used in the Bible refers to a person or an animal or to the life that a person or an animal enjoys. The Bible’s definition of the soul is simple, consistent, and unencumbered by the complicated philosophies and superstitions of men. But what happens to the soul at death? To answer that question, we must first understand why we die.

\* Matthew 10:28 also uses the word “soul” to mean “life.”

8. Are animals souls? Explain.

9. (a) What extended meaning can be attributed to the word “soul”? (b) Does this conflict with the idea that the soul is the person himself?

10. Give examples showing that the word “soul” can refer to the life that a person or an animal enjoys.

11. What may be said of the Bible’s use of the word “soul”?



*"O'er all the hilltops is quiet now, in all the treetops hearest thou hardly a breath; the birds are asleep in the trees: wait: soon like these thou shalt rest."*

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE, GERMAN POET.

## Why Do We Die?

**G**OD created humans with a yearning to live forever. Indeed, the Bible says that he put "a sense of eternity in their hearts." (Ecclesiastes 3:11, *Beck*) But God did more than give humans the *desire* to live forever. He also gave them the *opportunity* to do so.

<sup>2</sup> Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were created perfect, with no defect in mind or body. (Deuteronomy 32:4) Imagine—no chronic aches and pains, no morbid fears or anxieties! Furthermore, God placed them in a lovely paradise home. God purposed that man would live forever and that in time the earth would be filled with his perfect offspring. (Genesis 1:31; 2:15) Why, then, do we die?

### **Disobedience Brings Death**

<sup>3</sup> God commanded Adam: "From every tree of the garden you may eat to satisfaction. But as for the tree of the knowledge of good and bad you must not eat from it, for in the day you eat from it you will positively die." (Genesis 2:16, 17) So eternal life for Adam and Eve was conditional: it depended upon their obedience to God.

<sup>4</sup> Tragically, however, Adam and Eve disobeyed God's law. (Genesis 3:1-6) In doing so, they became sinners, for "sin is lawlessness."

1. 2. (a) Humans were created with what desire? (b) What kind of life did the first human pair enjoy?
3. Eternal life for Adam and Eve depended upon what?
4. When Adam and Eve sinned, why did they lose the prospect of living forever in Paradise?

(1 John 3:4) As a result, Adam and Eve no longer had the prospect of eternal life. Why? Because "the wages sin pays is death." (Romans 6:23) Thus, when pronouncing sentence upon Adam and Eve, God said: "Dust you are and to dust you will return." Our first parents were then expelled from their Paradise home. On the day that they sinned, Adam and Eve began the slow but steady process of dying.—Genesis 3:19, 23, 24.

### **"Death Spread to All Men"**

<sup>5</sup> Adam and Eve now had sin deeply etched in their genes. Hence, they could not produce perfect offspring, any more than an imperfect mold can produce a perfect object. (Job 14:4) Indeed, every human birth confirms that our first parents lost perfect health and eternal life for themselves and their progeny. The Christian apostle Paul wrote: "Through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because they had all sinned."—Romans 5:12; compare Psalm 51:5.

<sup>6</sup> Today scientists do not know just why humans grow old and die. The Bible, however, explains that we die because we are born sinful, having inherited this condition from our first human parents. But what happens to us when we die?

5. How did death spread to the entire human race?
6. Why do we die?



*"The doctrine that the human soul is immortal and will continue to exist after man's death and the dissolution of his body is one of the cornerstones of Christian philosophy and theology."*  
—"NEW CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA."

## What Happens to the Soul at Death?

THE above-quoted reference work, however, admits that "the notion of the soul surviving after death is not readily discernible in the Bible." What, then, does the Bible really teach about what happens to the soul at death?

### The Dead Are Unconscious

<sup>2</sup> The condition of the dead is made clear at Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10, where we read: "The dead know nothing . . . There is no pursuit, no plan, no knowledge or intelligence, within the grave." (*Moffatt*) Death, therefore, is a state of nonexistence. The psalmist wrote that when a person dies, "he goes back to his ground; in that day his thoughts do perish."—Psalm 146:4.

<sup>3</sup> So the dead are unconscious, inactive. When pronouncing sentence upon Adam, God stated: "Dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:19) Before God formed him from the dust of the ground and gave him life, Adam did not exist. When he died, Adam returned to that state. His punishment was death—not a transfer to another realm.

### The Soul Can Die

<sup>4</sup> When Adam died, what happened to his

1. What does the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* admit regarding the soul's surviving death?
2. 3. What is the condition of the dead, and what scriptures reveal this?
4. 5. Give examples from the Bible that show that the soul can die.

soul? Well, remember that in the Bible the word "soul" often simply refers to a person. So when we say that Adam died, we are saying that the soul named Adam died. This might sound unusual to a person who believes in the immortality of the soul. However, the Bible states: "The soul that is sinning—it itself will die." (Ezekiel 18:4) Leviticus 21:1 speaks of "a deceased soul" (a "corpse," *Jerusalem Bible*). And Nazirites were told not to come near "any dead soul" ("a dead body," *Lamsa*).—Numbers 6:6.

<sup>5</sup> A similar reference to the soul is found at 1 Kings 19:4. A severely distressed Elijah "began to ask that his soul might die." Likewise, Jonah "kept asking that his soul might die, and he repeatedly said: 'My dying off is better than my being alive.'" (Jonah 4:8) And Jesus used the phrase "to kill a soul," which *The Bible in Basic English* renders "to put to death." (Mark 3:4) So the death of the soul simply means the death of the person.

### "Going Out" and 'Coming Back'

<sup>6</sup> But what about the tragic death of Rachel, which occurred as she gave birth to her second son? At Genesis 35:18, we read: "As her soul was going out (because she died) she called his name Benoni; but his father called him Benjamin."

6. What does the Bible mean when it says that Rachel's soul was "going out"?

min.” Does this passage imply that Rachel had an inner being that departed at her death? Not at all. Remember, the word “soul” can also refer to the life that a person possesses. So in this case Rachel’s “soul” simply meant her “life.” That is why other Bibles render the phrase “her soul was going out” as “her life was ebbing away” (*Knox*), “she breathed her last” (*Jerusalem Bible*), and “her life went from her” (*Bible in Basic English*). There is no indication that a mysterious part of Rachel survived her death.

<sup>7</sup> It is similar with the resurrection of a widow’s son, recorded in 1 Kings chapter 17. In verse 22, we read that as Elijah prayed over the young boy, “Jehovah listened to Elijah’s voice, so that the soul of the child came back within him and he came to life.” Once again, the word “soul” means “life.” Thus, the *New American Standard Bible* reads: “The life of the child returned to him and he revived.” Yes, it was life, not some shadowy form, that returned to the boy. This is in harmony with what Elijah said to the boy’s mother: “See, your son [the whole person] is alive.”—1 Kings 17:23.

### **The Dilemma of the “Intermediate State”**

<sup>8</sup> Many professed Christians believe that there will be a future resurrection at which time bodies will be joined with immortal souls. Then, the resurrected ones will be

7. In what way is it that the soul of the widow’s resurrected son “came back within him”?

8. What do many professed Christians believe will happen during the resurrection?

## MEMORIES OF A PREVIOUS LIFE

**I**F NOTHING survives the death of the body, then what about the memories of a previous life that some claim to have?

Hindu scholar Nikhilananda says that ‘experiences after death cannot be demonstrated by reason.’ In the lecture “Models of Belief in Eternity in the Religions,” theologian Hans Küng points out: “None of the accounts—mostly coming from children or from the countries where there is a belief in reincarnation—of a recollection of a previous life could be verified.” He adds: “Most of [the researchers working seriously and scientifically in the field] admit that the experiences established by them do not provide the basis for a really convincing proof of a repetition of earthly life.”

What if you feel that you have personal memories of a previous life? Such feelings could be due to various factors. Much of the information we receive is stored away in some hidden corner of our subconscious mind because we have no direct or immediate use for it. When forgotten memories surface, some people interpret these as evidence of a former life. Nevertheless, the fact is that we have no verifiable experiences of life other than that which we live now. The majority of people alive on earth have no recollection at all of having lived before; neither do they think that they could have lived earlier lives.

consigned to their fate—either a reward for those who led a good life or retribution for the wicked.

<sup>9</sup>This concept sounds simple. But those who adhere to belief in the soul's immortality have trouble explaining what happens to the soul between the time of death and the time of resurrection. Indeed, this "intermediate state," as it is often called, has stirred speculation for centuries. Some say that during this period the soul goes to purgatory, where it can be purified of venial sins so as to become fit for heaven.\*

<sup>10</sup> However, as we have seen, the soul is simply the person. When the person dies, the soul dies. Hence, there is no conscious existence after death. Indeed, when Lazarus died, Jesus Christ did not say that he was in purgatory, Limbo, or any other "intermediate state." Rather, Jesus simply said: "Lazarus has fallen asleep." (John 11:11, *New English Bible*) Clearly, Jesus, who knew the truth about what happens to the soul at death, believed that Lazarus was unconscious, nonexistent.

### What Is the Spirit?

<sup>11</sup> The Bible says that when a person dies, "his spirit goes out, he goes back to his ground." (Psalm 146:4) Does this mean that a disembodied spirit literally departs and lives on after a person's death? That could not be, for the psalmist next says: "In that day his thoughts do perish" ("all his thinking ends,"

\* According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "the [Church] Fathers in general are clear in their affirmation of the existence of purgatory." Yet, this reference work also admits that "the Catholic doctrine on purgatory is based on tradition, not Sacred Scripture."

9. What is meant by the term "intermediate state," and what do some say happens to the soul during this period?

10. Why is it unscriptural to believe that souls linger in purgatory after death, and how does the experience of Lazarus confirm this?

11. Why could the word "spirit" not refer to a disembodied part of a person that survives death?

*NEB*). What, then, is the spirit, and how does it 'go out' from a person at the time of his death?

<sup>12</sup> In the Bible the words translated "spirit" (Hebrew, *ru'ach*; Greek, *pneu'ma*) basically mean "breath." Thus, instead of "his spirit goes out," the translation by R. A. Knox uses the phrase "the breath leaves his body." (Psalm 145:4, *Knox*) But the word "spirit" implies much more than the act of breathing. For example, in describing the destruction of human and animal life at the time of the global Deluge, Genesis 7:22 says: "Everything in which the breath of the force [or, spirit: Hebrew, *ru'ach*] of life was active in its nostrils, namely, all that were on the dry ground, died." So "spirit" can refer to the life-force that is active in all living creatures, both humans and animals, and that is sustained by breathing.

<sup>13</sup> To illustrate: Electric current powers a piece of equipment. If the current stops, the equipment ceases to function. The current does not take on a life of its own. Similarly, when a person dies, his spirit ceases to animate the body cells. It does not leave the body and move on to another realm.—Psalm 104:29.

<sup>14</sup> Why, then, does Ecclesiastes 12:7 state that when a person dies, "the spirit itself returns to the true God who gave it"? Does this mean that the spirit literally travels through space into God's presence? Nothing of the sort is implied. Remember, the spirit is the life-force. Once that life-force is gone, only God has the ability to restore it. So the spirit "returns to the true God" in the sense that any hope of future life for that person now rests entirely with God.

<sup>15</sup> Only God can restore the spirit, or life-force, causing a person to come back to life. (Psalm 104:30) But does God intend to do so?

12. What is implied by the Hebrew and Greek words translated "spirit" in the Bible?

13. In what way may the spirit be likened to electric current?

14. 15. How does the spirit return to God at death?





*"From the moment of birth there is the constant possibility that a human being may die at any moment; and inevitably this possibility is going to become an accomplished fact."*

—ARNOLD TOYNBEE, BRITISH HISTORIAN.

## A Sure Hope

**W**HO can argue with the above-mentioned historical truism? Mankind has always had to come to terms with the terrible reality of death. And what a sense of helplessness we experience when someone we love dies! The loss then seems totally irreversible. Is it possible to be reunited with our dead loved ones? What hope does the Bible hold out for the dead? Consider the following account.

### 'Our Friend Has Died'

<sup>2</sup> The year was 32 C.E. In the small town of Bethany, two miles outside Jerusalem, lived Lazarus with his sisters Martha and Mary. They were close friends of Jesus. One day, Lazarus became gravely ill. Promptly, his concerned sisters sent this news to Jesus, who was across the Jordan River. Jesus had affection for Lazarus and his sisters, so in time he set out for Bethany. On the road, Jesus told his disciples: "Lazarus our friend has gone to rest, but I am journeying there to awaken him from sleep." Since the disciples did not immediately grasp the meaning of this statement, Jesus said plainly: "Lazarus has died." —John 11:1-15.

1. What reality has mankind had to come to terms with, raising what questions?

2-5. (a) When his friend Lazarus died, how did Jesus demonstrate his willingness and ability to resurrect him? (b) Besides bringing Lazarus back to life, what did the miracle of resurrection accomplish?

<sup>3</sup> On hearing that Jesus was coming to Bethany, Martha ran out to meet him. Touched by her sorrow, Jesus assured her: "Your brother will rise." Martha answered: "I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus then told her: "I am the resurrection and the life. He that exercises faith in me, even though he dies, will come to life." —John 11:20-25.

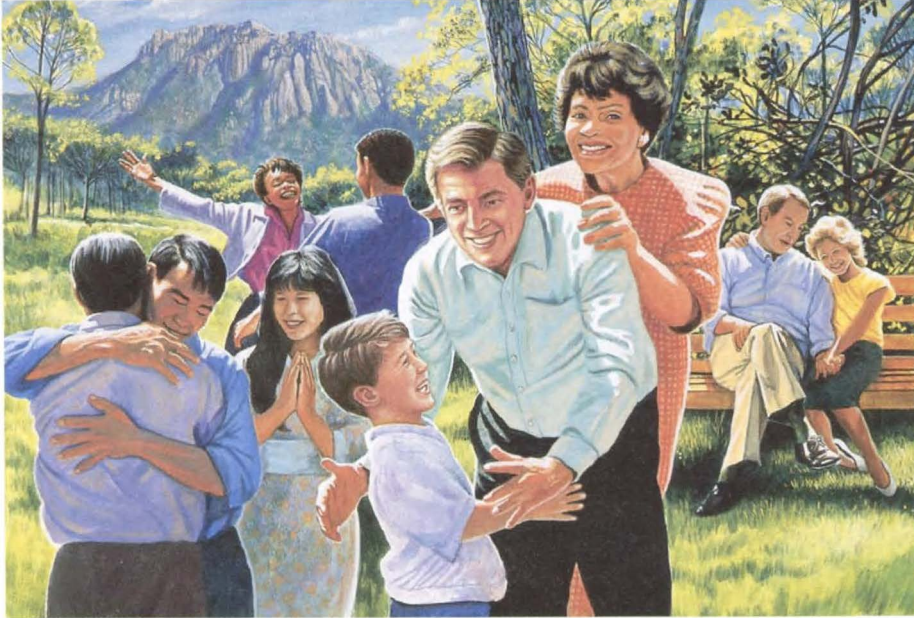
<sup>4</sup> Jesus then went to the tomb and directed that the stone closing its entrance be taken away. After praying aloud, he commanded: "Lazarus, come on out!" And as all eyes were fixed on the tomb, Lazarus did indeed come out. Jesus resurrected Lazarus—restoring life to a man who had been dead for four days! —John 11:38-44.

<sup>5</sup> Martha already had faith in the promise of a resurrection. (John 5:28, 29; 11:23, 24) The miracle of Lazarus' restoration to life served to reinforce her faith and instill faith in others. (John 11:45) But exactly what is meant by the term "resurrection"?

### "He Will Rise"

<sup>6</sup> The word "resurrection" is translated from the Greek word *a-na'sta-sis*, which literally means "a standing up again." Hebrew translators of the Greek have rendered *a-na'sta-sis* with the Hebrew words

6. What does the term "resurrection" mean?



*Resurrection will bring lasting joy*

*techi-yath' ham-me-thim'*, meaning "revival of the dead."\* Thus, resurrection involves raising the person from the lifeless condition of death—reactivating the life pattern of the individual.

<sup>7</sup> Being infinite in wisdom and perfect in memory, Jehovah God can easily resurrect a person. Remembering the life pattern of dead ones—their personality traits, their personal history, and all the details of their identity—is not a problem for him. (Job 12:13; compare Isaiah 40:26.) Jehovah is also the Originator of life. Hence, he can readily bring back to life the same person, giving him or her the same personality in a newly formed body. Moreover, as the experience of Lazarus indicates, Jesus Christ is both willing and able to resurrect the dead.—Compare Luke 7:11-17; 8:40-56.

<sup>8</sup> The Scriptural teaching of the resurrection, however, is not compatible with the doc-

\* While the word "resurrection" does not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures, the resurrection hope is clearly expressed at Job 14:13, Daniel 12:13, and Hosea 13:14.

7. Why will the resurrection of individuals pose no problem for Jehovah God and Jesus Christ?  
 8. 9. (a) Why are the resurrection and the idea of the immortality of the soul incompatible? (b) What is the remedy for death?

trine of the immortality of the soul. If an immortal soul survived death, no one would need to be resurrected, or brought back to life. Indeed, Martha expressed no thought about an immortal soul that was living on elsewhere after death. She did not believe that Lazarus had already gone to some spirit realm to continue his existence. On the contrary, she showed her faith in God's purpose to reverse the effects of death. She said: "I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day." (John 11:23, 24) Likewise, Lazarus himself related no experiences of some after-life. There was nothing to report.

<sup>9</sup> Clearly, according to the Bible, the soul dies and the remedy for death is the resurrection. But billions of people have died since the first man, Adam, walked the earth. So who will be resurrected, and where?

#### **'All in the Memorial Tombs'**

<sup>10</sup> Jesus Christ said: "The hour is coming in which all those in the *memorial* tombs will hear his [Jesus'] voice and come out." (John 5:28, 29) Yes, Jesus Christ promised that all

10. What promise did Jesus make regarding those in the memorial tombs?

those in Jehovah's memory will be resurrected. Billions of people have lived and died. Who among them are in God's memory, awaiting the resurrection?

<sup>11</sup> Those who have pursued a righteous course as Jehovah's servants will be resurrected. But millions of other people have died without showing whether they would comply with God's righteous standards. They were either ignorant of Jehovah's requirements or lacked sufficient time to make needed changes. These too are in God's memory and thus will be resurrected, for the Bible promises: "There is going to be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous."—Acts 24:15.

<sup>12</sup> The apostle John had a thrilling vision of resurrected ones standing before the throne of God. Describing it, he wrote: "The sea gave up those dead in it, and death and Hades gave up those dead in them, and they were judged individually according to their deeds. And death and Hades were hurled into the lake of fire. This means the second death, the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:12-14) Think of what that means! All the dead who are in God's memory will be released from Hades, or Sheol, mankind's common grave. (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31) Then "death and Hades" will be hurled into what is called "the lake of fire," symbolizing complete destruction. The common grave of mankind will cease to exist.

### **Resurrected Where?**

<sup>13</sup> A small number of men and women will be resurrected to life in heaven. These will rule with Christ as kings and priests and will share in undoing all the effects of the death

that mankind inherited from the first man, Adam. (Romans 5:12; Revelation 5:9, 10) According to the Bible, they number only 144,000 and are selected from among the followers of Christ, starting with the faithful apostles. (Luke 22:28-30; John 14:2, 3; Revelation 7:4; 14:1, 3) Jehovah will give each one of these resurrected ones a spirit body so that they can live in heaven.—1 Corinthians 15:35, 38, 42-45; 1 Peter 3:18.

<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of those who have died, however, will be resurrected to life on earth. (Psalm 37:29; Matthew 6:10) What kind of earth? The earth today is filled with strife, bloodshed, pollution, and violence. If the dead were to come back to life on such an earth, surely any happiness would be short-lived. But the Creator has promised that he will soon bring an end to the present world society that is under Satan's control. (Proverbs 2:21, 22; Daniel 2:44) A righteous new human society—"a new earth"—will then be a reality. (2 Peter 3:13) At that time "no resident will say: 'I am sick.'" (Isaiah 33:24) Even the anguish of death will be done away with, for God "will wipe out every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will mourning nor outcry nor pain be anymore. The former things have passed away."—Revelation 21:4.

<sup>15</sup> In God's promised new world, the meek ones "will indeed find their exquisite delight in the abundance of peace." (Psalm 37:11) The heavenly government of Christ Jesus and his 144,000 associates will progressively bring obedient mankind back to the perfection that our original parents, Adam and Eve, lost. Included among the inhabitants of the earth will be the resurrected ones.—Luke 23:42, 43.

<sup>16</sup> The Bible gives a glimpse of the joy that

11. Who will be resurrected?

12. (a) What vision did the apostle John receive about the resurrection? (b) What is "hurled into the lake of fire," and what does that expression mean?

13. Why has God arranged for some to be resurrected to heaven, and what kind of body will Jehovah give them?

14. 15. (a) To what kind of life will the vast majority of those who have died be resurrected? (b) What blessings will obedient mankind experience?

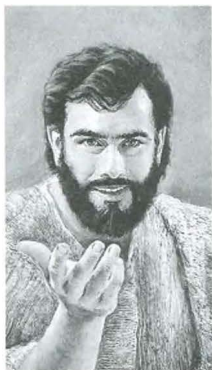
16-18. What joy will the resurrection bring to families?

the resurrection will bring to families. Imagine the happiness the widow of Nain felt when Jesus stopped the funeral procession and resurrected her only son! (Luke 7:11-17) Later, near the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus brought back to life a 12-year-old girl, her parents “were beside themselves with great ecstasy.” —Mark 5:21-24, 35-42; see also 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37.

<sup>17</sup> For millions who are now asleep in death, a resurrection will mean life in a peaceful new world. Just think of the thrilling prospect this opens up for Tommy and for the businessman, mentioned in the opening section

of this brochure! When Tommy awakens to life in Paradise on earth, he will be the same Tommy his mother knew—but without ailments. She will be able to touch him, hold him in her arms, and love him. Similarly, rather than being trapped in an almost endless cycle of rebirths, the businessman from India has the marvelous prospect of opening his eyes in God’s new world and beholding his sons.

<sup>18</sup> Knowing the truth about the soul, about what happens to us when we die, and about the hope of the resurrection can also have a profound effect on those who are living now. Let us see how.



*“You will know the truth,  
and the truth will set you free.”*  
—JOHN 8:32.

## The Truth About the Soul Matters

**B**ELIEFS regarding death and the Hereafter are largely a result of one’s religious and cultural background. As we have seen, they range from the conviction that the soul realizes its final goal only after numerous rebirths to the idea that a single lifetime determines one’s final destiny. Consequently, one person may feel confident of finally merging with the ultimate reality upon

dying, another of achieving Nirvana, and yet another of reaping a heavenly reward. What, then, is the truth? Since our beliefs influence our attitudes, actions, and decisions, should we not be concerned with finding the answer to that question?

<sup>2</sup> The oldest book in the world, the Bible, traces man’s history back to the creation of

1. Why is it important to examine our beliefs about the soul and death?

2. 3. (a) Why can we put confidence in what the Bible says about the soul? (b) As stated in the Bible, what is the truth about the soul?

the first human soul. Its teachings are free of philosophies and traditions of men. The Bible clearly states the truth about the soul: Your soul is you, the dead are completely nonexistent, and those in God's memory will be resurrected in his due time. What can knowing this mean for you?

<sup>3</sup> "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." said Jesus Christ to his followers. (John 8:32) Yes, the truth is liberating. But from what will the truth about the soul set us free?

### **Freedom From Fear and Despair**

<sup>4</sup> "Most people fear death and try to avoid thinking about it," says *The World Book Encyclopedia*. "The word 'death' itself has become almost unmentionable in the West," notes one historian. And in some cultures such euphemisms as "passed on" and "passed away" are commonly used to describe a person's dying. This fear of death is actually a fear of the unknown, since to most people death is a mystery. The knowledge of the truth about what happens when we die alleviates this fear.

<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example, the state of mind of 15-year-old Michaelyn. She had leukemia and faced a tragic death. Her mother, Paula, recalls: "Michaelyn said she didn't mind dying because she knew that death was only temporary. We talked a lot about God's new world and all those who will be resurrected in it. Michaelyn had tremendous faith in Jehovah God and the resurrection—not an ounce of

doubt." The resurrection hope freed this courageous young girl from an overwhelming fear of death.

<sup>6</sup> How did the truth affect Michaelyn's parents? "Our little girl's death was the most painful thing that has ever happened to us," says Jeff, her father. "But we trust implicitly in Jehovah's promise of the resurrection, and we look forward to one day holding our dear Michaelyn in our arms again. What a reunion that will be!"

<sup>7</sup> Yes, the truth about the soul frees a person from the hopeless despair that the death of a loved one may bring. Of course, nothing can completely eliminate the pain and sorrow experienced when a loved one dies. The resurrection hope, however, tempers the mourning and makes the pain far easier to bear.

<sup>8</sup> The Scriptural truth about the condition of the dead also frees us from fear of the dead. Since learning this truth, many who were once shackled to superstitious rituals concerning the dead no longer worry about curses, omens, charms, and fetishes, nor do they offer costly sacrifices to appease their ancestors and prevent them from returning to haunt the living. Indeed, since the dead "are conscious of nothing at all," such practices are ineffectual.—Ecclesiastes 9:5.

<sup>9</sup> The truth about the soul, found in the Bible, is indeed liberating and trustworthy. But consider also a unique prospect that the Bible holds out to you.

*The truth about  
the soul sets  
you free from  
the fear of death,  
fear of the dead,  
despair over  
the death of a  
loved one*

4. 5. (a) What fear does the truth about the soul dispel? (b) How did the resurrection hope impart courage to a terminally ill teenager?

6. 7. From what despair does the truth about the soul free us? Illustrate.

8. 9. From what fear does the truth about the condition of the dead free us?



*“Everyone that is living and exercises faith in me will never die at all.”*

—JOHN 11:26.

## A Unique Prospect!

**W**HEN millions are raised in the resurrection, they will not be brought back to life on an empty earth. (Acts 24:15) They will awaken in beautifully improved surroundings and will find that living quarters, clothing, and an abundance of food have been prepared for them. Who will make all these preparations? Clearly, people will have to be living in the new world before the earthly resurrection begins. But who?

<sup>2</sup> The fulfillment of Bible prophecy shows that we are living in “the last days” of this system of things.\* (2 Timothy 3:1) Very soon now, Jehovah God is going to intervene in human affairs and wipe out wickedness from the earth. (Psalm 37:10, 11; Proverbs 2:21, 22) At that time, what will happen to those who are faithfully serving God?

<sup>3</sup> Jehovah will not destroy the righteous along with the wicked. (Psalm 145:20) He has never done such a thing, and he will not do it when he cleanses the earth of all badness. (Compare Genesis 18:22, 23, 26.) In fact, the last book of the Bible speaks of “a great crowd,

\* See *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* chapter 9, published by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

1. Millions now dead will be resurrected to what kind of surroundings?

2-4. What unique prospect lies ahead for those living in “the last days”?

which no man was able to number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues.” coming out of “the great tribulation.” (Revelation 7:9-14) Yes, a great multitude will survive the great tribulation in which the present wicked world ends, and they will enter God’s new world. There, obedient mankind can benefit fully from God’s marvelous provision to free mankind from sin and death. (Revelation 22:1, 2) Thus, the “great crowd” need never experience death. What a unique prospect!

<sup>4</sup> Can we have confidence in this astounding hope? Absolutely! Jesus Christ himself indicated that there would be a time when people would live without ever dying. Just before resurrecting his friend Lazarus, Jesus told Martha: “Everyone that is living and exercises faith in me will never die at all.”—John 11:26.

### **You Too Can Live Forever**

<sup>5</sup> Do you want to live forever in Paradise on earth? Do you yearn to see your loved ones again? Then you must take in accurate knowledge of God’s will and purposes. In a prayer to God, Jesus said: “This means everlasting life, their taking in knowledge of you, the only true God, and of the one whom you sent forth, Jesus Christ.”—John 17:3.

<sup>6</sup> It is God’s will that “all sorts of men should  
5. 6. If you want to live forever in Paradise on earth, what should you do?

be saved and come to an accurate knowledge of truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3, 4) Now is the time to learn how you, along with millions of others already doing God’s will, can live forever in Paradise on earth. Jehovah’s Witnesses will be happy to assist you in learning more about God and his requirements. Why not contact them at a Kingdom Hall near you or write to the nearest address listed on the following page?

*“A great crowd” need never experience death*





## Is the Soul Immortal?

- ▶ Most religions teach that something inside a person—a soul, a spirit, a ghost—is immortal and continues living after death. Is that true?
- ▶ How was the doctrine of the immortality of the soul born?
- ▶ How did this teaching become central to most religions of our time?
- ▶ What really is the soul?
- ▶ Why do we die?
- ▶ What happens to the soul at death?
- ▶ What hope is there for the dead—and for the living?
- ▶ Does what you believe about the soul really matter?

*The truthful and satisfying answers to these questions are found in the oldest book ever written.*

*You are invited to examine them in this brochure.*

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