

Soul-Destroying

**A study of the biblical realities of death
and the destiny of God's people**

*For in death there is no remembrance of You;
in the grave who will give You thanks?
(David, the 'man after God's own heart', Psalm 6:5)*

*...that I may know Him
and the power of His resurrection,
and the fellowship of His sufferings,
being conformed to His death,
if, by any means,
I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.
(The Apostle Paul, Philippians 3:10,11)*

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Introduction

I have entitled this essay *Soul-Destroying*, not because I believe that man's soul is ultimately to be destroyed (for I do not) but because I believe that the Scriptures destroy the popular church teaching of what the soul is. The title also metaphorically describes my emotional experience when confronted with the possibility that what I had been taught for almost thirty years had misled me into serious doctrinal error. However, only when faced with this realisation was I able to reconstruct my understanding of the soul and see the saint's true hope: bodily resurrection from the dead.

Though my convictions on this doctrine have strengthened over the last year, mainly as a result of testing them against the biblical texts used in this essay, I must accept that others may wish to point out where they think I err. I may be making some obvious mistakes with the texts I examine. I may not have considered other obvious texts. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to provoke discussion.

This essay has emanated from a request that I explain and defend my views concerning the doctrine of 'going to Heaven when you die'. I had not envisioned that the task would produce a work of this size. The reason it did so is because of the wealth of biblical texts that many people (I believe) are either ignoring or misinterpreting. The reader can assume from the offset that I am neither a skilled nor experienced essay writer – this much will become obvious – so I accept that there will be many structural flaws and clumsy use of language. Hopefully any negative feedback, therefore, will be premised upon a sincere disagreement with biblical interpretations and not upon the academic presentation of these views.

In order to be consistent I must accept that, if I have been wrong before, I can be wrong again. But ought this reality to hinder me from re-examining and challenging popular doctrines? I think not. I must not be ashamed to ask any question, even should I challenge what transpires to be the truth. Such a process should ultimately serve to give me more confidence in the truth.

Were it to come down to which doctrines I would prefer to espouse, it would undoubtedly be those I formerly held. Why should I wish to destroy things I once considered fundamental to biblical faith, and risk strong disagreement with many important influences and friends?

I do not hold these things lightly and would therefore trust that any response to them is taken seriously, the responses themselves being open to testing.

1. The dangers of orthodoxy

Was man originally created with an immortal soul, and do the souls of God's people ascend to Heaven after death? To begin to question these things is not only to intrude upon widely-held beliefs but also our emotional responses over what occurs to us after death. However, do the Scriptures teach that man was created with an immortal soul? If not, what happens to our loved ones? Where are the church fathers? Where are the martyrs?

This is a doctrine that I have taught with conviction to children. My first song, entitled *Heaven's Streets of Gold*, was composed to encourage children to seek Heaven as their ultimate destination. Thus, I fully embraced and taught others that an integral part of the 'good news' was that a saved soul ascends to Heaven after physical death.

But it is evident now to me that the Bible does not teach this. The destination for the dead is not Heaven, either at death or resurrection. What changed my mind? I began to study the Scriptures on this matter more intently. In the past, I assumed that a treasured doctrine defended by most denominations, and one defended throughout all of church history, ***must*** have actual biblical proof, even if I were not aware of it.

However, is it sufficient to accept something simply because of what others have believed and embraced in the past? Are their writings not to be compared with the exact wording found in the Bible? Should a specific church doctrine defended by the church fathers prohibit others from disagreeing because they have discovered something contrary? If so, then the Scriptures become of secondary value and the church fathers' writings should be read in church services instead of the Bible.

Upon investigating the issue of 'soul immortality', I became increasingly alarmed not to find a single explicit reference in the Bible of "immortal soul" or that souls ascend to Heaven at death. On the one hand, how can this cardinal doctrine be lacking in the Scriptures, and on the other hand – as I formerly did – be so passionately taught by many?

There are many 'proof-texts' used – most of which will hopefully be referred to in this document – but even among these texts there seems to be no unequivocal statement of what is considered a fundamental doctrine (the most commonly used 'proof-texts' don't even use the word 'Heaven').

There are clear references to salvation by grace through faith, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, His substitutionary death, His resurrection, His continued intercession for His

people as High Priest, His Second Coming, the forgiveness of sins, *our* resurrection, etc.; but no statement seems to explain, or even paraphrase, the doctrine of man's soul going to Heaven at the point of death. Rather, I feel that the doctrine is assumed and several 'proof-texts' are suggested as *touching upon* this 'truth', and thus these verses are used to build upon a doctrine that was never biblically established in the first place.

Bearing in mind the reasonable claim that an absolute reference to the doctrine is elusive within the Bible, is it not alarming that most of the church consider it a fundamental part of the good news of Jesus Christ? Why is it the automatic response of many to defend the prevailing view instead of taking more time to consider the weight behind an alternative understanding? Why is the alternative view sometimes given the same response a cult doctrine would receive?

It seems that the rule of thumb today is to judge the substance of a doctrine by setting it against the backdrop of its popularity within orthodox Christianity. The tendency to validate doctrines in this manner ought to generate more suspicion than when someone challenges the doctrine of going to Heaven. Why do we rush to defend a cherished viewpoint when our means of validating that viewpoint is at best questionable itself?

God's Word is not subject to a popularity contest when interpreting its doctrines. The revered saints from key moments in church history – justifiably or not – *have been* subject to these kinds of tests. Their teaching has determined their acceptance within Christendom, but their popularity is no proof within itself that their teaching was biblical.

Calvin and Wesley would have disagreed on doctrines that are considered of importance to the faith, and yet few today would label either a 'heretic'. Most people who subscribe to either extreme in the differing theologies of these men would not go as far as insulting their 'opponents' in this way. Why is this the case? Presumably it is because they agreed upon what are today considered to be 'fundamentals'. The doctrine that involves man's soul going to Heaven would, no doubt, be among these agreements.

The continued lack of challenge to this view throughout church history has therefore created the potential for many to fear openly questioning it. It is not presented as a doctrine worth testing by Scripture and serious debate, and yet my own experiences lead me to believe that it is considered biblical *because* it is orthodox. This

orthodoxy, in my view, causes us to impose doctrines upon biblical texts that do not concern the doctrine in question.

In short, I am challenging the prevailing notion that a doctrine's widespread acceptance – whether geographically or historically – is sufficient as a defence of the doctrine itself. The only respect in which I should be concerned with what Spurgeon had to say about 'going to Heaven' is the biblical evidence he used. The same can be said for any other revered name.

In other words, what does the Bible say? Orthodoxy prevented all of God's people, bar two, from entering the Promised Land. Orthodoxy led God's people into captivity. Let us not assume that the church today is incapable of forming orthodox views at the expense of God's truth.

*For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. **(Galatians 1:10)***

2. Texts that should suggest a problem with the prevailing view

John 3:13

*Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? **No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man** *who is in heaven*. (John 3:9-13)*

*These words are not included in any ancient manuscript preceding the 9th century. Not one of the thousands of manuscripts that predate this include the expression, thus rendering it unreliable.

"No one has ascended to heaven". I had never considered the implication of this simple statement to my theology. Had no one ever entered Heaven prior to Jesus' remark? To me, this would seem to be the plain understanding.

But is there a danger in misinterpreting these words when separated from the surrounding context? Is that what I am doing by my literal interpretation of Jesus' statement? I would answer that, yes, of course there is always a danger in misunderstanding literature of any sort when reading a statement that is separated from its context. The context informs us *who* is saying the words, *to whom* and *when*, as well as revealing the subject-matter.

Perhaps by re-examining the context of John 3 I would discover that Jesus has provided us with a new understanding of what "heaven" and/or "Son of Man" mean, in which case this one sentence I have highlighted would take on a new meaning. Perhaps the context has established a less than common understanding of the word 'ascend'. Again, this would be cause for reinterpreting the highlighted statement.

However, given that the context does *not* suggest uncommon understandings of these words, it makes the statement plain and simple: '*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven*'.

Nonetheless, some have suggested that Jesus' comment is incomplete when taken by itself; they infer that Jesus was saying only He had the right to come from Heaven to man with the knowledge of God. In other words, 'no one has ascended and descended from Heaven with the knowledge of God except the Son of Man'. But why does the original statement *need* to be qualified? It makes sense by itself. Are we not

seeking to qualify it because, taken plainly and simply, it contradicts a predetermined theology?

The context is important, yes, but the remark is nonetheless categorical. Contextually, Ephesians 5 is not about the drinking of alcohol, but "*do not be drunk with wine*" (v18) is still categorical and can exist as a fully understood stand-alone statement. It is an absolute: 'don't be drunk!' In and of itself, it does not explain the thought process behind Ephesians 5 but the command doesn't require an appreciation of the surrounding context in order to be obeyed. Such is the case with John 3:13. The statement is an absolute – how can the words be taken any other way? There was a contextual purpose for saying it – I agree – but the statement stands on its own as a truth. The categorical truth (the plain statement) supported the Son's sole right to heavenly knowledge (the context).

Others, like me, may be familiar with circumstances where re-telling a funny story falls flat on its face. The person doesn't appreciate the humour so we respond with, "you had to be there" (i.e. "I was there - you weren't - and it was funny"). Irrespective of the details of the funny story, there is a plain and simple statement: "you had to be there". What can be understood from these words alone, separated from the context? Answer: the listener was not "there". The funny story formed the context, but the story's details are not required to inform us of the simple truth that the listener was not in the same place. The statement does not say "you were there, walked away for a few minutes when the funny incident occurred, and then returned". There is not enough information to make such an assumption. All we know is that the listener was not "there". To import any extra meaning to the statement would reflect the eisegesis made with John 3:13.

Another far-fetched example (not based on experience this time): I am the only man ever to set foot on Mars. I return to share my knowledge of the planet and am met with ignorance of my findings. I respond, "no one has ever been there except me". The context of the conflict is the *knowledge of Mars* but the statement that I use to prove my knowledge is categorical and can stand alone by itself: "no one has ever been there except me". It does *not* mean "no one has ever been to Mars [and discovered the things I have] except me".

Nicodemus could not understand heavenly things if he were unable to grasp earthly things. Irrespective of the context of what those "things" were, Jesus made the qualification for why only He could know them: nobody has been to Heaven except for Him!

I agree that Jesus was using His experience of, and right to, heavenly knowledge in order to make a point to Nicodemus; and I further believe that the knowledge He was sharing regarded resurrection (a subject that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, should have mastered). But when Jesus challenged his inability to understand '*heavenly things*' He made a universal statement that could be employed in any context: nobody has ever gone to Heaven except the Son of Man!

This is precisely why Nicodemus had no chance of grasping what Jesus was talking about. Jesus spoke to him about resurrection in earthly terms (vv.5-8) and Nicodemus failed to grasp the meaning. What chance then did Nicodemus have of grasping the truth from Heaven's perspective?

[I believe that Jesus was using the expression 'born again/from above' as a description of the events of Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37:1-14 – it is only there that the same order of 'water/cleansing, breath/Spirit, Kingdom/dwelling in the land' is mentioned: events that occur when the 'dry bones' are resurrected; events with which the teacher Nicodemus should have been familiar.]

After rebuking "*the teacher of Israel*" for not understanding, Jesus then presented Himself as a superior Teacher, one who not only understood heavenly truths but could impart these truths as *He was the only Man who had been there*.

Some have noted this difficulty and accepted Jesus' words for what they mean: *at that point* no one had ascended to Heaven except Him. Their resolution to the difficulty of where dead saints resided was found in a compartment of *Sheol*, the place of the dead.

It is a view with which I am a little familiar as, in the past, I found it somewhat convincing. The saints would be comforted in an area of *Sheol* (or *Hades* in Greek) that was known as *Abraham's Bosom* while everyone else suffered in the remainder of *Sheol*. The account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is used to support this theological assertion. I object to such an interpretation of this passage but I will leave that for deeper discussion later. One must also consider how this view of *Abraham's Bosom* correlates with the general understanding of Ecclesiastes 12:7, where the "*spirit will return to God who gave it*". Given the church's interpretation of "*spirit*" this would mean that saints went straight to Heaven even under the Old Covenant.

The relevance of this *Sheol* doctrine to doctrines about 'going to Heaven' lies in the belief that, upon His resurrection (or possibly His ascension), the Lord Jesus brought the residents of *Abraham's Bosom* to Heaven with Him. He had paid the redemptive price and was 'setting the captives free'. I have heard Ephesians 4:7-10 used to support this contention.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men."(Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4:7-10)

I do not wish to make my argument stronger by building a 'straw man' on behalf of the opposing view so I should accept that there is possibly a lot more Scripture than the above used to support the idea that Christ brought the righteous dead with Him to Heaven after His victory over death. However, to date, this is the only argument of which I am aware, and again it seems to forge an unnatural meaning into words that do not expressly state this doctrine.

When Christ was leading '*captivity captive*' was He leading the righteous dead to Heaven? Does the language not suggest the opposite: the taking of a **prisoner**? When Christ '*descended into the lower parts of the earth*' was He in *Abraham's Bosom*? Could the '*lower parts of the earth*' not simply refer to the grave – a reference to His death?

As I see it, the '*captivity*' which Christ was leading '*captive*' involved the principalities and powers of which He had made a public spectacle (Colossians 2:15). Furthermore, the verse Paul quotes (Psalm 68:18) is taken from a context where the captives are the enemies of God. There seems no inherent idea of the '*captive*' being His own people. This seems a more natural reading to me as the text does not mention Christ leading *people* or *souls* from underneath the earth. The only Person mentioned is Christ Himself.

Acts 2:29-35

Another refutation of the accepted doctrine of 'going to Heaven' is, I believe, found in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

“Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’” (Acts 2:29-35)

Peter made two statements on the Day of Pentecost that are relevant to this discussion: King David was *“both dead and buried”*; King David *“did not ascend into the heavens”*. This seems a strange thing to say of a saint whose soul, according to popular theology, was either in Heaven from the moment of his death or had ascended with Christ to Heaven after the Lord's resurrection.

I understand that Peter's main point was to show that David's prophecy in Psalm 16 did not speak of himself, but Christ. This focus upon Christ, however, does not excuse relegating David to nonexistence, if indeed David was in a blissful state of existence. According to the theology of 'Christ leading the righteous dead to Heaven', David *would* have ascended into the heavens. Of course such an ascension would by no means be as majestic as the physical ascension of Christ, the Firstfruits of the Dead, but could it really be said of him that he *“did not ascend into the heavens”*?

The reason Peter is alluding to David is because he has just quoted from a Davidic Psalm:

I foresaw the LORD always before my face, for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence. (Acts 2:25-28)

Can it be argued that, because the context of Acts 2 is the preaching of the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, the whereabouts of David's immaterial soul did not need to be addressed by Peter? Since Peter was talking about the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, would this imply that all references to David were only physical as well? In other words, did Peter mean 'David's body is both dead and buried; David's body did not ascend into the heavens; but David's immaterial soul is another issue entirely'?

A difficulty for me in accepting this understanding is that the "soul" is very much part of the context. In verse 27, Peter quotes this word from David in Psalm 16:10. 'You will not leave my soul in Hades'. Since Peter clarifies that the Psalm did not concern David's destiny, but Christ's, we must then assume that David's soul is still in Hades. Presumably the church would understand "soul" to be physical here because this is the only way to remain consistent with their theology. With this I would agree for, as I will explain later, I believe the 'soul' to be the man in his entirety, never an immaterial aspect. By contrast, the church must assert that there is an ambiguity to the word 'soul' – sometimes it refers to the material, sometimes the immaterial. This would beg the question then of why Peter used such an ambiguous word in a context where, supposedly, he would not have wanted to suggest that all of David was in the grave (body and soul/spirit).

In other words, if it were Peter's intention to express that David was dead only physically, but not touch upon the 'immaterial soul', why would he use the word 'soul' at all?

As for those who hold to the teaching that the Lord Jesus, upon His Resurrection or Ascension, brought the righteous dead to Heaven from *Abraham's Bosom*, I think it would be hard to argue that Peter does not mention this because it is not part of the context. The context is the Resurrection and Ascension! Would Peter say "David did not ascend into the heavens" about an event in which, as a consequence, David did ascend into the heavens?

I agree that the context is the resurrection of the body. It is the doctrine I am questioning (ascension from *Abraham's Bosom*) that I think muddies the waters here. It adds an invisible element that involves Old Testament saints. We cannot therefore say it is not part of the context of the Lord's physical resurrection. The doctrine forces the saint to be a part of a context that should only ever involve one Man.

Had Peter said, “David is both dead, buried and in his tomb but his soul resides in peace in Heaven” would the church today have had a problem with the latter half of the statement? Would they have questioned its right to remain in the text because the context is physical? I say this because I think the lack of mention of David’s soul is conveniently explained away by the physical context, rather than being allowed to challenge us as to whether or not such a soul even exists. However, I would again suggest that the *Abraham’s Bosom* doctrine does not permit this convenience. According to the doctrine, the physical ascension of Jesus occurred alongside the spiritual ascension of dead saints – the same historical event cannot be so easily divided into two different contexts.

In my opinion, the truth that David is dead loses all its intended impact if we assume he is, in one sense, very much alive. In reality he is given an unflattering description: dead, buried and still in the tomb. The text does not say ‘*David’s body*’ is dead, buried and still in the tomb. It is simply ‘*David*’, and no clue is given as to another part of him being alive.

The Psalm of David from which Peter quoted says the following:

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalm 16:9-11)

All accept that David is not speaking about himself, but Christ. Nobody would contend that David’s physical body saw no corruption but this was not the only thing that David would miss out on. The words that directly follow describe a ‘*fullness of joy*’ in the ‘*presence*’ of God. If therefore Peter assigns the sentiments of David’s Psalm to Christ, then these final words are also inapplicable to the one who is described as ‘*dead and buried*’, who ‘*did not ascend into the heavens*’. King David’s body, therefore, is not only still in the grave, but King David himself has no experience of the ‘*fullness of joy*’ in God’s ‘*presence*’ – a privilege only known by the Son of God.

However, I believe that the strongest argument against this notion of David’s soul ascending to Heaven is found in the definition of ‘soul’ itself – a point I wish to come to next.

3. What is the soul?

Meanings and usage of 'NEPHESH'

*The spiritual, rational, and immortal part in man; that part of man which enables him to think, and which renders him a subject of moral government; -- sometimes, in distinction from the higher nature, or spirit, of man, the so-called animal soul, that is, the seat of life, the sensitive affections and fantasy, exclusive of the voluntary and rational powers; -- sometimes, in distinction from the mind, the moral and emotional part of man's nature, the seat of feeling, in distinction from intellect; -- sometimes, the intellect only; the understanding; the seat of knowledge, as distinguished from feeling. In a more general sense, an animating, separable, surviving entity, the vehicle of individual personal existence. (**Noah Webster Dictionary definition of 'soul'**)*

*"The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is . . . speculation . . . nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture . . . The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended" (**Jewish Encyclopaedia, 1941, Vol. VI, "Immortality of the Soul," pp. 564, 566**).*

Of these two views, I have moved from embracing the former to accepting the latter. I hope I will be able to adequately explain my reasoning because I find teaching of the soul to be quite confusing, even when presented by good communicators. As I presently understand this subject, I do not believe that we have an immaterial and immortal soul, nor do I believe man to be a bipartite or tripartite being.

I used to think that the soul was the seat of my character, my emotions, and that somehow it would continue to exist separate from my body once it expired, essentially making my body a shell. The spirit was that component which was aware of the Creator, the soul also needing to embrace this knowledge. Without the spirit no communication with Him was possible.

I tentatively held a view (probably a very inconsistent one given my lack of study of the subject) that, when Adam and Eve sinned, the spirit of man was corrupted – perhaps it even 'collapsed' into the soul – making knowledge of God impossible without the Holy Spirit.

If this sounds like an incoherent explanation of my prior views, it should. Others are more articulate in explaining and defending such beliefs, though ironically the best explanations come from those who still stop short of being dogmatic. They recognise a lack of explicit theology on the bipartite/tripartite nature of man.

But however well presented some of these views are, and however much study has been put into deciphering how many ‘parts’ a man has (and how they interrelate), I am beginning to think that the lack of clarity suggests we should never have been viewing the nature of man in such a way at all. The theology that has arisen from this topic, I feel, has taken us away from a simple question: what is a soul? That said, though the question is simple to understand I personally have found it difficult to answer. I have strong convictions as to what it is not, but providing a succinct definition of what it is can be very challenging.

The sheer number of verses in the Bible that deal with ‘soul’ and variations of its Hebrew and Greek roots would justify a book in itself to deal with it all. As you will see, I began trying to show the texts in which the Bible uses the word, but couldn’t even get halfway through the Old Testament because of the space it was taking up. The potential translations of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*NEPHESH*) are numerous, and using an English concordance was therefore not as simple as referencing each use of the word ‘soul’.

For example, the NKJV’s first use of the word ‘soul’ is in Genesis 19:20.

See now this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one; please let me escape there (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live’.

The KJV has three prior occurrences of the word – the first being the following:

*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul [the NKJV translates it as ‘being’]. (**Genesis 2:7**)*

But the Hebrew word *NEPHESH* has another four prior occurrences in the Bible:

Then God said, “Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures [NEPHESH], and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.” So God created great sea creatures and every living thing [NEPHESH] that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good... Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature [NEPHESH]

*according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind”; and it was so. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is **life** [NEPHESH], I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so. (Genesis 1:20-21,24)*

This illustrates the lack of straightforwardness in understanding the meaning of ‘soul’. The exact same Hebrew word is used to translate “thing”, “creature” and “life”. Can the type of word that is used for “cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth” also illuminate the Bible reader to an immaterial and immortal component of mankind?

Even aside from these various meanings of NEPHESH, the English translation of Genesis 2:7 ought to cause us to question such a doctrine. “Man **became** a living soul” does not express the idea of possession. The verse does not say that man was ‘given’ or ‘had’ a living soul. He **became** (היה; *hayah* – to fall out; come to pass; become; be) that soul. Adam **was** that soul! The verse itself carries no sense of possession of an immaterial component that would live on after Adam’s death. In fact, no translation of NEPHESH carries this meaning:

(5315) NEPHESH: a soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion (NASB Exhaustive Concordance)

(5315) NEPHESH: any, thyself, them your-selves, slay, soul, tablet, they, thing (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance)

NEPHESH: soul, self, life, creature, person, appetite, mind, living being, desire, emotion, passion (Brown, Driver, Briggs. Hebrew Lexicon)

Though NEPHESH is translated into various English words, thus making it difficult to summarise, none of the above translations suggest an immaterial and immortal ingredient of humanity.

As seen, it is used to describe the whole creature, but NEPHESH also seems capable of describing things that pertain to the life of the creature – the word can refer to its desires (i.e. *who* the creature is as well as *what* it is). Perhaps this venture away from physicality is what has led many to accept that we *have* an immaterial soul. There is clearly a figurative use of the word as well as a literal one, as I hope to demonstrate.

However, the Bible’s linguistic use of NEPHESH strikes me as no different to how we often use the word ‘heart’. We know that ‘wholehearted’ uses the tangible to express something intangible. We would never presume to have an immaterial heart. Why can’t ‘soul’ be viewed similarly? If one physical organ can be used to personify the non-physical (heart), why can’t the whole being (soul)?

Were Scripture to tell us that man did have an ethereal component where his true self resided then perhaps the usage of *NEPHESH* could have stretched this far. But where is that Scripture? I find the concept when reading about Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs, Greek Platonic philosophy and Gnosticism, but not in the Bible.

I feel that we assume such a component exists and then interpret the Bible accordingly – naturally leading us to the doctrine of ‘going to Heaven when we die’ (after all, an immortal soul has to go somewhere). But the onus really ought to be on Bible teachers to defend and explain why the soul is a distinct constituent part of man, not defend and explain how the soul relates to and interacts with body and spirit.

My opinion is that ‘soul’, as much as *NEPHESH*, is a word that requires translation. It is as if we have translated one foreign word into another! When we hear ‘soul’ do we think of this one purported component of humanity or the entire person (e.g. ‘that poor soul’, ‘more than one hundred souls perished at sea’)? Even in English it has an ambiguity, so we cannot be sure what the primary meaning of *NEPHESH* is if we only use the English word ‘soul’.

I would, however, venture a guess that every occurrence of the word in Hebrew Scripture has a valid translation among the definitions provided by the Lexicons, quoted above. The apparent semantic relationship with the verb שָׁפַח (*NAPHASH* – a homonym of *NEPHESH*) would suggest that ‘air-breathing’ is associated with the *NEPHESH*, and so the same ought to be considered for our biblical understanding of ‘soul’. We should derive our primary understanding of *NEPHESH* from the physical qualities that pertain to being an air-breathing being. Mobility must also be considered a key attribute of that which is *NEPHESH* (locomotion being something which plants do not have, explaining why they are not considered as ‘souls’ in Scripture).

#5314 NAPHASH - A primitive root; to breathe; passively, to be breathed upon, i.e. (figuratively) refreshed (as if by a current of air) -- (be) refresh selves (-ed).
(Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance)

Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female servant and the stranger may be refreshed (NAPHASH). (Exodus 23:12)

It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed (NAPHASH). (Exodus 31:17)

Now the king and all the people who were with him became weary; so they refreshed (NAPHASH) themselves there. (2nd Samuel 16:14)

In short, I do not hold to the view that we possess a soul – an immortal immaterial true self. If the *English word* were to be properly understood then I would say that the soul is ***me***: the complete person, body and mind if you like. It is not ethereal. Every part of it has its origin in the dust from which Adam was miraculously formed. It will return there until the day that the 'last Adam', who alone has risen from it, comes back to resurrect it.

The mortal and material soul, and other usages

When Genesis 2:7 refers to man as a “living soul” (a designation repeated for various creatures in Genesis 1:21; 2:19; 9:10,12,15,16) it causes me to ask why the word “living” was necessary if we already knew the soul to be immortal. Can there be such a thing as a “dead soul” in the common understanding of the word?

Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I [literally ‘my soul’ נַפְשִׁי – from NEPHESH] may live because of you.”
(Genesis 12:13)

The KJV, ASV and Young’s Literal Translation all translate the word as ‘soul’ in this verse (unlike the NKJV, which I am using) so it certainly seemed appropriate at one time to use this English understanding of NEPHESH. Yet the evident implication within the verse is that Abram’s soul could die, otherwise he would not have made such a request to Sarai before travelling to Egypt. I assume it was for this reason that translators of more recent editions of the Bible felt that NEPHESH here referred to Abram’s physical life – in other words, Abram himself rather than his ‘immortal soul’. That common church understanding of soul clearly could not apply here, so recent translators felt obliged to avoid confusion with the ‘immortal soul’ by not using the word ‘soul’ at all.

But was this a case of translation or interpretation? The translators *assumed* that souls can’t die so they refused to translate NEPHESH as such, even though ‘soul’ is the most popular translation of the word. In other words, interpretations have influenced our modern translations and thus we are no longer afforded objectivity in our quest to understand the Bible.

The above is just one of many examples that illustrate a frustration over my understanding of the Bible’s meaning of ‘soul’. I know that most would agree that ‘living’ is a necessary adjective to partner ‘soul’ at the beginning of Genesis, because ‘soul’ here refers to the creature, the physical being. Most would also agree that the above verse (Genesis 12:13) carries the exact same translation of NEPHESH. But when does it ever refer to an ethereal component of our being? When is NEPHESH (or the Greek equivalent ψυχή / *psuchē*) ever used to refer to our ‘never-dying soul’? I find it difficult to grasp the concept that I can both *be* a soul and *possess* a soul at the same time. I find it difficult to grasp that, if such be the state of man, the Holy Spirit would apply the same Hebrew and Greek word to two concepts which require serious distinction.

Though I have far from exhausted the occurrences of ‘soul’ in the Bible I’m still not convinced that there is any context in which the word could refer to the immaterial

and immortal understanding of it. Instead I find that mortality and materiality are inferred, and if not, it is used in a figurative sense.

Though the following verses will take up a few pages, I actually had to stop referencing the Old Testament usage of *NEPHESH* by the time I had reached the book of Judges (with a few exceptions). [For a list of all 754 occurrences of נֶפֶשׁ in the Old Testament I recommend accessing Bill Ramey's work at <http://www.inthebeginning.org/oldtestament/nephesh.pdf>].

Neither are New Testament uses of *psuchē* exhausted. I hope I have been honest enough to provide an extensive overview of how this word appears in the Bible that does not shy away from those uses which are less physical. In the lists below I therefore hope to show many *literal* and *figurative* uses of *NEPHESH*.

The soul can die/be killed – it is mortal

And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” (Genesis 17:14)

Indeed now, your servant has found favour in your sight, and you have increased your mercy which you have shown me by saving my life (NEPHESH); but I cannot escape to the mountains, lest some evil overtake me and I die. See now, this city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one; please let me escape there (is it not a little one?) and my soul (NEPHESH) shall live.” (Genesis 19:19-20)

For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from Israel... For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land. (Exodus 12:15,19)

You shall keep the Sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from among his people. (Exodus 31:14)

But the person (NEPHESH) who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, while he is unclean, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from his people. Moreover the person (NEPHESH) who touches any unclean thing, such as human uncleanness, an unclean animal, or any abominable unclean thing, and who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from his people.” (Leviticus 7:20-21 [see also vv.25, 27])

Therefore everyone who eats it shall bear his iniquity, because he has profaned the hallowed offering of the LORD; and that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from his people. (Leviticus 19:8)

You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead (NEPHESH), nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:28)

Say to them: 'Whoever of all your descendants throughout your generations, who goes near the holy things which the children of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has uncleanness upon him, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from My presence: I am the LORD. (Leviticus 22:3)

For any person (NEPHESH) who is not afflicted in soul ['in soul' not in original text] on that same day shall be cut off from his people. And any person (NEPHESH) who does any work on that same day, that person (NEPHESH) I will destroy from among his people. (Leviticus 23:29,30)

'Whoever kills any man (lit. whoever takes any human NEPHESH) shall surely be put to death.' (Leviticus 24:17)

All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body (NEPHESH) ... and the priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned in regard to the corpse (NEPHESH); and he shall sanctify his head that same day. (Numbers 6:6,11)

But the man who is clean and is not on a journey, and ceases to keep the Passover, that same person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from among his people, because he did not bring the offering of the LORD at its appointed time; that man shall bear his sin. (Numbers 9:13)

'But the person (NEPHESH) who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person (NEPHESH) shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him.'" (Numbers 15:30,31)

Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. That person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from Israel. (Numbers 19:13)

'But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person (NEPHESH) shall be cut off from among the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD.' **(Numbers 19:20)**

Let me [lit. my NEPHESH] die the death of the righteous **(Numbers 23:10)**

So the men answered her, "Our lives for yours [lit. our NEPHESH for yours, to die], if none of you tell this business of ours. And it shall be, when the LORD has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you." **(Joshua 2:14)**

On that day Joshua took Makkedah, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them— all the people (NEPHESH) who were in it. He let none remain. He also did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho. **(Joshua 10:28)**

Zebulun is a people who jeopardized their lives (NEPHESH) to the point of death, Naphtali also, on the heights of the battlefield. **(Judges 5:18)**

Behold, all souls (NEPHESH) are Mine; the soul (NEPHESH) of the father as well as the soul (NEPHESH) of the son is Mine; the soul (NEPHESH) who sins shall die. **(Ezekiel 18:4)**

Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive [lit. he will save his NEPHESH]. **(Ezekiel 18:27)**

The conspiracy of her prophets in her midst is like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured people (NEPHESH); they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in her midst. **(Ezekiel 22:25)**

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. **(Matthew 10:28)**
(though made distinct from the physical life of the person, the soul can nonetheless be destroyed)

*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? **(Matthew 16:26)** (does the context not suggest soul means life? How can an immortal soul be lost or exchanged?)*

Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." **(Matthew 26:38)**

For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. (Acts 2:27 [see also Psalm 16:9-11]) (it seems to me that a soul left in Hades may see corruption, therefore a physical sense of the word must be intended)

Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:20)

The soul can touch, eat, speak, be bought – it is material

‘Or if a person (NEPHEESH) touches any unclean thing, whether it is the carcass of an unclean beast, or the carcass of unclean livestock, or the carcass of unclean creeping things, and he is unaware of it, he also shall be unclean and guilty... ‘Or if a person (NEPHEESH) swears, speaking thoughtlessly with his lips to do evil or to do good, whatever it is that a man may pronounce by an oath, and he is unaware of it—when he realizes it, then he shall be guilty in any of these matters. (Leviticus 5:2,4)

But the person (NEPHEESH) who eats the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offering that belongs to the LORD, while he is unclean, that person (NEPHEESH) shall be cut off from his people. (Leviticus 7:20)

And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person (NEPHEESH) who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. (Leviticus 17:10 [see also vv.11, 12, 15])

The person (NEPHEESH) who has touched any such thing shall be unclean until evening, and shall not eat the holy offerings unless he washes his body with water. (Leviticus 22:6)

‘No outsider shall eat the holy offering; one who dwells with the priest, or a hired servant, shall not eat the holy thing. But if the priest buys a person (NEPHEESH) with his money, he may eat it; and one who is born in his house may eat his food.’ (Leviticus 22:10,11)

Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean; and the person (NEPHEESH) who touches it shall be unclean until evening.’” (Numbers 19:22)

Other physical uses of ‘soul’

But all in the seas or in the rivers that do not have fins and scales, all that move in the water or any living thing (NEPHEESH) which is in the water, they are an abomination to you. (Leviticus 17:10)

'This is the law of the animals and the birds and every living creature that moves in the waters, and of every creature (NEPHESH) that creeps on the earth...' **(Leviticus 11:46)**

Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature (psuchē) in the sea died. **(Revelation 16:3)**

Figurative uses of 'soul'

I believe that it is easier to view the following verses (almost all found in Deuteronomy) as using 'soul' in a figurative sense. We know that 'heart' must be viewed as such because God hardly demands our physical hearts to serve Him. Equally so, it must be figurative to say "love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength". If taken as three distinct arenas in which we must serve God what is the difference between heart and soul? How can we give something all of our heart but *not* our soul or strength? By simply serving God in everything we do we are attaining to this expectation in its entirety. The language is surely 'a turn of phrase' and intended as inspirational to us, not a call to examine three supposedly distinct forms of worship. As such, I believe that 'soul', in these verses, can be understood as the 'whole being' – an understanding that would fit the figurative expressions well.

But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. **(Deuteronomy 4:29)**

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. **(Deuteronomy 6:5 [see also Matthew 22:37])**

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul **(Deuteronomy 10:12)**

'And it shall be that if you earnestly obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the LORD your God and serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul' **(Deuteronomy 11:13 [see also 13:3; 26:16; 30:2,6,10])**

Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. **(Deuteronomy 11:18)**

But take careful heed to do the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, to love the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to keep His commandments, to hold fast to Him, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Joshua 22:5)

I believe that this figurative sense of *NEPHESH* is further supported by the following verses. In the first two verses the NKJV translators actually translated *NEPHESH* as 'heart' (i.e. 'heart' and 'soul' can effectively be two words that mean the same thing when used figuratively – perhaps when more than one is used it is simply for emphasis). This again raises the question that if one physical organ can be spoken of in a non-physical sense, why must we assume the 'soul' to be immaterial when used in the same contexts?

However, you may slaughter and eat meat within all your gates, whatever your heart (NEPHESH) desires, according to the blessing of the LORD your God which He has given you; the unclean and the clean may eat of it, of the gazelle and the deer alike. (Deuteronomy 12:15 [see also 14:26; 18:6])

When the LORD your God enlarges your border as He has promised you, and you say, 'Let me eat meat,' because you long to eat meat, you may eat as much meat as your heart (NEPHESH) desires. (Deuteronomy 12:20 [see also v21])

The torrent of Kishon swept them away, That ancient torrent, the torrent of Kishon. O my soul, march on in strength! (Judges 5:21)

Then they said to one another, "We are truly guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear; therefore this distress has come upon us." (Genesis 42:21)

If your brother, the son of your mother, your son or your daughter, the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is as your own soul, secretly entices you, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which you have not known, neither you nor your fathers (Deuteronomy 13:6)

The following occurrence of *NEPHESH* has been used as evidence of an immaterial, immortal part of man. It is easy to see why this is the case if Scripture teaches it elsewhere, but the verse itself does not teach it.

And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. (Genesis 35:18)

The idea that an ethereal component of Rachel was departing as her body died is easy to understand given the accepted theology, but if “soul” is not explicitly defined as such elsewhere in the Bible, and yet can be defined as ‘life’, is there a problem in viewing the expression as meaning ‘her life was departing’? Given the accepted meanings of *NEPHESH* in the Hebrew Lexicons should this not be our first point of reference when interpreting the verse?

The soul as ‘desire’

The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; My desire (NEPHESH) shall be satisfied on them. I will draw my sword, My hand shall destroy them.’ (Exodus 15:9)

1st Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The potential for biblical expressions being figurative should not be underestimated here also. If Paul were underlining a doctrine on the nature of man when writing to the Thessalonians it begs the question why the following verses are not viewed the same way.

*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of **soul** and **spirit**, and of **joints** and **marrow**, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the **heart**. (Hebrews 4:12)*

If 1st Thessalonians 5:23 confirms that man is a tripartite being then why does Hebrews 4:12 not confirm that he in fact is more than that? Even if one were to argue that “*joints*” and “*marrow*” are one single part (the body), the “*heart*” is presented as having “*thoughts and intents*”. It can hardly be the physical heart then. So why is “*heart*” distinguished from “*soul*” and “*spirit*”? Following the logic which is used to deduce a doctrine from 1st Thessalonians 5:23 I can therefore redefine that doctrine with Hebrews 4:12 – man has at least *four* constituent parts: body (divided into joints and marrow), soul, spirit and heart.

But such logic would also be challenged when encountering the following verse:

*And you shall love the LORD your God with all your **heart**, with all your **soul**, with all your **mind**, and with all your **strength**.’ This is the first commandment. (Mark 12:30)*

I tend to think that all of the above verses contain expressions that convey the idea of the ‘complete being’. Which of the verses lose their significance when interpreted in such a way? I do not believe that 1st Thessalonians 5:23 is done any disservice when understood like this. Our entire being ought to be sanctified by God. Our entire being is known by God in the tiniest detail. Our entire being should love God. This, to me, is the inherent theology of the verse – no composition of man can be read into it without having God’s Word contradict itself.

Matthew 10:28

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

Given the understanding of 'soul' which I believe to be biblical, it is less than straightforward to see it in this verse. The same is true, however, of the common understanding of 'soul' also. If we interpret the verse according to our strictest interpretations of the word, both views are proved wrong.

Just as man can kill the body, God can kill both soul and body. To say that "*destroy*" does not mean the same as "*kill*" in this verse is, I believe, to read one's preconceptions into the text. For a start, the plain reading of Jesus' statement is 'do not fear the person who can do a certain thing against the body, but fear the Person who can do this same thing to both body and soul.' The change of emphasis is upon what is being harmed (the object noun) not the harming itself (the verb).

Secondly, the word used for "*destroy*" comes from the Greek word ἀπόλλυμι (apollumi). The same verb is used in the exact same form earlier in Matthew's Gospel.

*Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child **to destroy Him** (Matthew 2:13)*

No other understanding of the word can be taken than 'kill' – in the same sense as "*do not fear those who kill the body*".

I believe that this undermines the opinion that "*destroy*" is not a synonym for "*kill*" in Matthew 10:28. It seems to me to be the most natural reading of the word within the phrase. Thus, whatever the "*soul*" is, it can be killed by God. Furthermore, the statement made by Jesus – in order to carry any power – would suggest that God will kill "*both body and soul*" if certain conditions aren't met.

It should surely therefore be conceded that, whatever difficulties this verse presents to my interpretation of it, it equally causes problems to those who hold that man has an immortal soul.

Consider verse 39 of the same chapter:

He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

Jesus has not moved location or context since verse 28. It is the part of the same message He was giving to His disciples. Both verses also seem to be saying similar things regarding God's judgement. Though the similarities between the verses seem somewhat evident, they are not helped by the translators' choice of using two different English words to represent one Greek word.

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

He who finds his life [psuché] will lose it, and he who loses his life [psuché] for My sake will find it.

To the English reader, "soul" and "life" can mean very different things but Matthew, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, used the same word, which, given that it is used in the same speech and context, ought to mean the same thing on both occasions. If, in verse 28, "soul" refers to an immaterial and immortal component of man, why would it not mean the same in verse 39? Therefore, not only can the 'immortal' be killed by God (v28), we are also advised to somehow 'lose' our immaterial and immortal self if we wish to find it again (v39).

It is therefore my contention that neither verse makes sense if we interpret *psuché* as a separate immaterial component of man. But I must also recognise that *psuché* cannot refer to the physical life here either. I do believe that this is its core meaning. 1st Corinthians 15:45 uses *psuché* to translate *NEPHESH* in Genesis 2:7. However, there are many figurative uses of *NEPHESH* in the Old Testament (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2,6,10) so there is no reason that *psuché* would not be the same in the New Testament.

There is something that man cannot destroy but God can. There is something that we can purposely 'lose' today in order to 'gain' it tomorrow (and vice versa). What is it? Hope? Character? Self-worth?

As argued before, we have no problems with using the word 'heart' outside of its strictest meaning. We take a definite physical human organ and allow its name to represent intangible emotions, and in the process we make its figurative definition difficult to encapsulate. If a hollow, pump-like organ of blood circulation can be used to describe our deepest feelings for someone, then did the Greeks (or Jews) not have

the right to take the name applied to the *entire living being* and allow its scope to broaden?

I do not know what the “*soul*” *specifically* means in Matthew 10. But I believe I get the gist. Man can cause my body to stop functioning but man will not have the final say on my judgment. If I lose what I wish to gain today, I will gain what I wish to gain in the future.

James 2:26

For as the body without the spirit [pneuma] is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Pneuma can also mean 'breath', as in the following:

*And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath [pneuma] of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming. **(2 Thessalonians 2:8)***

*Now after the three-and-a-half days the breath [pneuma] of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. **(Revelation 11:11)***

*He was granted power to give breath [pneuma] to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. **(Revelation 13:15)***

The role of 'breath' in the creation of man (Genesis 2:7) is addressed in the next section, but evidently I think it reasonable to replace 'spirit' with this word in James 2:26.

4. Does man's continued existence after physical death negate God's penalty for sin?

Returning to dust – the entire man

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17)

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:19)

All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, all that was on the dry land, died. (Genesis 7:22)

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep. (Job 14:12)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

We are part of a race upon whom a severe penalty was placed. "You shall surely die" was a warning that came into effect the moment Adam and Eve were found guilty of the first sin. Most have, I believe, correctly understood that there is a physical element to this death (though I would differ by seeing it as *only* physical, for that is all man is). The proof is in the fact that not only Adam and Eve, but *all sinners* die.

However, when we assume there to be an immortal soul indwelling us we also admit that not every part of us dies. Conscious existence in whatever form implies life. This

relegates the warning given by God to a half-truth. The comfort that is given to God's people – that our experiences immediately from the point of death will be bliss – softens the severity of the punishment pronounced upon Adam and Eve. Though this understanding of the penalty still recognises an inherent severity, it nonetheless stops short of how God pronounced it.

Following the recorded process of Adam's creation we see that he was formed from dust and that the only energising factor that made him "a living soul" was the "breath of life". Later in the same chapter the warning is given: "in the day that you eat of [the fruit] you shall surely die". With the information that we have prior to this pronouncement, should we not assume death to be the removal of the "breath of life"? Adam, the "living soul", would become a dead soul.

We are not told of a soul that is separate from Adam's body in the first place, and the warning does not say anything of this either. Therefore if the created being was called 'Adam', and this 'Adam' was warned that he would die if he sinned, what else can we conclude except the death of the created being? Nothing else is spoken of remaining alive. Whatever God created would die.

When considering Ecclesiastes 12:7 (above), we may further our understanding of the significance of the "breath of life" from its initial life-giving role to what happens to it at human death. As we have seen, the "breath of life" is what made Adam the "living soul". Ecclesiastes 12:7 then tells us that "the spirit" returns to God after death. The word used in Genesis 2:7 for "breath" is **הַנְּשָׁמָה** (NESHAMAH). Strong's give it no other translation. The word for "spirit" in Ecclesiastes 12:7 is **רוּחַ** (RUACH), which can translate as *spirit*, *wind* or **breath**. Is it possible that this verse is telling us that the **breath** 'will return to God'? This speaks nothing of a part that permanently belongs to man. If anything, it speaks of something borrowed which God, the rightful owner, will reclaim one day because of the penalty incurred by Adam. It is this very withdrawal that effectuates the penalty, reducing man to the dust from which he was formed.

In fact, it is not just man who is spoken of as receiving a "breath of life".

All in whose nostrils was the breath (NESHAMAH) of the spirit (RUACH) of life, all that was on the dry land, died. (Genesis 7:22)

[here NESHAMAH and RUACH are used together to describe the breath of the creature, which to me seems a strong suggestion that Genesis 2:7 – NESHAMAH – and Ecclesiastes 12:7 – RUACH – can be understood as speaking of the same 'breath'/'spirit'.]

In the Flood all animal life that was killed was said to possess this "breath of life". Furthermore, this breath is said to be "the breath of the spirit of life". The same NESHAMAH and/or RUACH that energised man was also energising animals. We have already considered reasons for animals being classed as 'souls' (NEPHESH). Now we

are also told that, while they lived, they had “*the spirit*” (*RUACH*). What then is different between the constitution of mankind and animals? If we say that humans have an immaterial, immortal soul and a spirit, we must do the same for animals. The Bible makes no distinction. However, it would seem more straightforward to me that both men and animals **are** ‘souls’, and possess ‘the breath of life’/‘the breath of the spirit of life’/‘a spirit’ as long as they remain living, breathing creatures. The major difference between man and animal (apart from obvious social, intellectual, zoological and physical differences!) is the resurrection-promise, which will be addressed in the final section of this document.

The quote from Job 14:12 supports the idea that this is how early members of the human race understood death. “*Sleep*” can be a euphemism for death (Psalm 13:3; 76:6; Jeremiah 51:39,57; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11-14; 1st Corinthians 11:30; 15:51; Ephesians 5:14; 1st Thessalonians 4:14; 5:10). Job is explicitly speaking of death when he talks about “*sleep*” (v.10) which makes it all the more striking when he says that man “*does not rise*”. Though all would agree this is the case with the body, where is Job’s suggestion that the ‘soul’ rises? After all, it is purported to be our ‘true self’, so such a hopeless forecast by Job does not match up with this popular doctrine that is full of hope (though I believe a false hope).

What I believe *should* be our hope is more than hinted at in Daniel 12:2 - resurrection. This hope is set against what precedes it chronologically – not souls in Heaven receiving their resurrected bodies, but “*those who sleep in the dust of the earth*”. The New Testament may have more to say on this hope but even Job was aware of it:

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

Job’s hope was in his own resurrection, or, more accurately, his hope was in the One who would resurrect him. Knowing therefore the same hope with which New Testament writers were familiar, one ought to take Job’s less hopeful statement (14:12) more seriously. If he knew of the resurrection at the Lord’s return then surely his knowledge of where the dead were at that time would be just as accurate. Nothing good is said of them, which helps us appreciate the extent of the punishment of sin.

'You shall surely die' – lack of evidence for spiritual death

*And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for **in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.**" (Genesis 2:16-17)*

I am under the impression that most people hold to the view that Adam's death had to be 'spiritual' due to the fact that he did not die instantly. Perhaps this is because the word **יוֹם** (*YOM*) – translated as "day" – is stated as the time at which Adam would "die". If Adam therefore did not die in the same 24-hour period in which he ate the fruit it is assumed that another kind of 'death' took place. This, I believe, is an unnecessary judgement to make.

Strong's shows that *YOM* can be understood beyond the literal 24-hour concept: 'time', 'age', 'life', 'period' are just some of the many other translations. We know that Adam died physically. This requires no 'reading between the lines'. His eventual physical death is surely sufficient in itself to prove God's warning to be true. Rather than reconcile the 'problem' of Adam not physically dying on the day of his sin by saying that he 'died spiritually', ought we not to reconcile the problem by recognising that this *YOM* (in Genesis 2:17) was not a twenty-four hour period?

Furthermore, I find it difficult to follow how man has a spirit that is essentially dead. Does it mean that man is born without a spirit, or with a dead spirit that can be revived by the Holy Spirit? Where in the Genesis record does it speak of Adam being given such a spirit? Except for "the breath of life", which it can be argued returns to God at the point of death, there is no mention of man having a spirit let alone a description of what it is. This again comes back to previous disagreements I now have concerning man's tripartite constitution, so it is probably wasteful to repeat the same arguments. However, it is still worth mentioning this extra difficulty as, once again, I believe that to make God's pronouncement mean anything other than the death of the physical man (which is the entire man) is not to take God at His word.

We would all agree that Adam and Eve *eventually* died as a result of their sin (had it only been the 'spirit' affected by the fall then surely the body would have continued to live endlessly) so we cannot help but accept that physical death was what God meant when He gave the warning.

Otherwise, He meant 'spiritual' and physical death, but not death of the 'soul' – why did the 'soul' survive this penalty?

'You shall not surely die' – the new twist on the oldest lie

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:1-5)

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. (John 8:44)

*Ye are of a father -- the devil, and the desires of your father ye will to do; he was a man-slayer from the beginning, and in the truth he hath not stood, because there is no truth in him; when one may speak **the falsehood**, of his own he speaketh, because he is a liar -- also his father. (John 8:44 – Young's Literal Translation)*

I have referenced John 8:44 because I believe it highlights that the lie first told in the Garden of Eden was still being perpetuated. In most translations the link is concealed by the English, but the literal translation (as seen in the YLT quote) shows that Jesus was calling Satan the father of '*the lie*' (or '*falsehood*'). English Bible translators have obscured this by either saying he was the father of '*a lie*' or the father of '*lies*'. Perhaps not considering there to be a connection to one specific lie the translators generalised the term. This is understandable. After all, is it likely that Satan has only ever told one lie? However, this is another case of interpretation rather than direct translation of the text. Even if it does not make sense to call him the '*father of **the lie***', that is what the text says and it should have been translated as such.

If we are to attribute one specific lie to Satan the best place to look is the conversation between himself and Eve. God had given a direct warning that, were the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil to be eaten, Adam would "*surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). Satan's advice was the exact opposite – a deliberate lie.

But how can such a lie be perpetuated throughout history? Millions of people, through reading the Scriptures, have seen Satan's lie for what it is, so how could he continue to repeat it? I believe that in John 8:37-47 there is evidence that he perpetuated this lie **through** the Jews *after first deceiving them by a form of the lie*.

Jesus was accusing His listeners of having the same motive as Satan: telling lies in order to carry out a desire for murder. Satan lied about the fruit. The Jews (among many lies against Jesus) lied about their supposed faithfulness to Abraham by exposing a desire to murder the Son of God.

This set of verses is prefaced by a comment in verse 35 that perhaps exposes the lie that the Jews believed: they would “*abide in the house forever*”. Though they held to a hope of life beyond this life, it is likely that many of these Jews would not see the benefit of it. Their response to Jesus showed how deceived they were. This could parallel the lie told in the Garden of Eden. Eve was fooled into thinking she would not physically die – the Jews were fooled into thinking all would be well in the resurrection for them. Both deceptions pertained to a false hope of life.

This leads us to consider how this lie is still being perpetuated in the church today. By believing in the continued existence of our souls after death we are actually saying ‘I will not ***really*** die’. However, should the soul actually be ‘the complete person’ (all originating in the dust) then this lie is unmasked. But once we adhere to a doctrine that teaches of immortality already existing within man, residing in an immaterial soul, then we are saying that we do not really die. How often have we used such terminology when speaking of a saint who has died? I have done this often, and meant it.

But viewing the manner in which the church has accepted this doctrine throughout history, despite its seeming lack of biblical support, I am compelled to view this as a satanic tactic. Such a tactic is more than useful in taking our focus away from the clearly biblical hope of physical resurrection and all the doctrines that pertain to this. The return of Christ is made less appealing to our minds when we are reminded of a supposed event that takes place at the day of our death – a day it is almost impossible to look forward to.

'Soul sleep' teaching: punishment that still does not fit the crime

I am including this short segment to clarify that I know very little of the 'soul sleep' teaching which is taught by a minority of churches.

What I have heard is that proponents of 'soul sleep' still believe the soul to be a separate component of man's make-up – possibly also holding to its immortality and immateriality. The 'sleep' is supposedly also a conscious rest for the soul until physical resurrection.

If this is the case then I obviously disagree. I have purposely not sought to find out the details of 'soul sleep' doctrine because I wish to be swayed by others' opinions as little as possible. I am not trying to align myself to any group, old or new. I wish only to discuss what the Bible is saying so that, even if I am wrong, I will not have to listen to accusations of being influenced by 'cultish' doctrine.

Suffice to say that, in the case of 'soul sleep', the punishment inflicted upon mankind for sin (death) is still not sufficient. The whole man dies and nothing remains, not even in a state of rest. This is what I am presently seeing in Scripture.

4. Problems with the proof-texts

Enoch

Enoch lived sixty-five years, and begot Methuselah. After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:21-24)

“Took him” where?

By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, “and was not found, because God had taken him”; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God. (Hebrews 11:5)

I had always assumed that Enoch was taken to Heaven. I understood “and he was not” to mean that he was nowhere on earth. Hebrews clarifies that “was not” means “was not found”. But Hebrews 11:5 does little more with regards to expanding upon Enoch’s story. We are not told that Enoch was taken to Heaven. We are not told where he was taken. His pleasing testimony resulted in him not seeing death. With others I would have automatically read this as ‘Enoch never died’.

But it is not just my suspicions of a pre-resurrection ‘afterlife’ that cause me to now doubt this conclusion; it is what is said eight verses later:

***These all died in faith**, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. (Hebrews 11:13)*

I would take this to mean that, along with Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Enoch died. Verse 13 does not say “These all died in faith, with the exception of Enoch”. The word “all” is important for it seems to include Enoch within the category of the dead. Up to this point there have only been five individuals mentioned, and the sixth individual is not mentioned until verse 20. Would we list the names of five people, refer to a common trait in four of them and then say this trait belonged to “all” without stating clearly that there is one exception?

Had the statement in verse five said, ‘Enoch never experienced death’ it would be easier to accept that he is an exception to verse 13 (though it still would make verse 13 strange in that it doesn’t say ‘...except Enoch’). Instead we have an expression in

verse five which, though accepted by Christian tradition to mean he never experienced death, can be understood differently.

“Enoch was translated – not to see death” (Young’s Literal Translation) refers to one moment in time. This is important to recognise because it opens up a very feasible alternative to the common understanding of the verse. Yes, the common understanding of the verse is consistent with such a statement (Enoch was taken to Heaven at one single moment in order not to see death) but this is not the only possible interpretation. The only thing we can be absolutely sure of from the verse is that, at one moment, Enoch was ‘translated/changed’ in order not to see death. Effectively, at one moment he escaped dying.

I wear a seatbelt so that, in the event of being involved in a collision, I ‘will not see death’ but the seatbelt does not rescue me from the spectre of death as a whole. Could Enoch’s translation not be viewed in this way? Why can Enoch’s story not include the detail of a miraculous rescue from imminent death rather than a miraculous transformation into Heaven? In my opinion, verse five by itself can prove neither but verse 13 strongly implies the former rather than the latter.

Though some translations go into specifics by saying that Enoch was “taken up” or “taken up to heaven” (NASB; NLT) the Greek word used in Hebrews 11:5 – μετατίθημι (metatithemi) – can only mean one of the following:

#3346 metatithemi – carry over, change, translate (Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance)

None of these words carry the idea of being “taken up” to Heaven. The same Greek word is used in Galatians 1:6 to say the following:

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel.

There is no suggestion of ‘going to Heaven’ in the word’s usage here.

Enoch, it seems, was simply “translated” – carried away from one particular place to another – or “changed”. If I am asked to specify where I think Enoch did go, or what change occurred, I have no authority to comment – God’s Word does not give us this detail. But God’s Word does say that he eventually died (Hebrews 11:13) – the wording of verse five does not give conclusive proof that he is an exception.

I *assume* that Enoch was miraculously transported from a life-threatening scenario to a safe place so that he would not experience death. It seems more plausible to

assume that he was rescued from death on one particular occasion. The transformation presumably prevented there being any record in Genesis 5 of his death or an idea of what age he eventually lived to, and I think this is what has led to the belief that he did not die at all. I would also suggest that such a scenario would most definitely still make Enoch worthy of mention in Hebrews 11's 'roll of honour'. Whom else did God rescue in such a way!

The dangerous situation in which he was found came about, perhaps, on account of his pleasing testimony (in other words, his faithfulness had created dangerous enemies). God rescued him by transporting him to another place. This is speculation. But it is speculation which, I believe, first allows God's Word to state the basic facts. The only reason I state the speculation is to suggest that there are alternative interpretations which do not contradict the statement in Hebrews 11:13 that Enoch was among those who died.

For me, the common interpretation actually raises more questions than answers. If Enoch was taken to Heaven without seeing death, in what form does he now exist? Is he still in the same physical body? Would that body not possess the curse of sin: death? Has he been transformed? If so, does that not mean his old body is now **dead**? How can the curse of death be removed except for death and resurrection? Where is Enoch's flesh and blood? If it is not yet dead then it has to die because he cannot enter the Kingdom of God with it (1st Corinthians 15:50).

Furthermore, were Enoch to have this claim to continual existence how does this prove a general rule of soul/spirit immortality? Within the common view he is seen as an *exception* (he continued physically) so this cannot prove a general rule as to what happens to *us* immaterially.

I will conclude these thoughts on Enoch with an example of a biblical situation where someone else "*did not see death*".

So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust [Jesus] out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way. (Luke 4:28-30)

Elijah

Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. (2nd Kings 2:11)

Though there was no explicit mention of Enoch going to Heaven, the same cannot be said of Elijah. Here he is clearly described as going there. But I believe there are good grounds for not assuming he went into the presence of God. The following occurrences of 'heaven' in the Old Testament are worth considering.

Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. (Genesis 27:28)

When Isaac pronounced this blessing upon Jacob was he really asking for dew that came from the presence of God or from the sky? A similar question can be asked of the next verse.

Then Israel shall dwell in safety, the fountain of Jacob alone, in a land of grain and new wine; his heavens shall also drop dew. (Deuteronomy 33:28)

The heaven from which dew comes is presumably the same heaven from which we get our weather. To my limited meteorological knowledge whirlwinds would also originate here. As such, it is not difficult to contemplate that the Bible is really telling us that Elijah went up by a whirlwind into the sky (some would call this 'the first heaven').

The record of Jesus' ascension in the *Acts of the Apostles* further supports this.

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

Did the apostles watch Jesus ascend all the way "into" Heaven, the abode of God? Is that possible? Jesus "passed through the heavens" (Hebrews 4:14) so such a feat of eyesight would be impressive.

οὐρανὸν (ouranon) is used four times in Acts 1:10-11 and can mean either 'sky' or 'heaven'. It would therefore seem more straightforward to translate the word as

'sky' in this context (as the NASB and NIV have it). The apostles were evidently staring in the direction of the sky.

שָׁמַיִם (shamayim) is the Hebrew word that is translated as 'heaven' in the verse that describes Elijah's ascension (2nd Kings 2:11). As with its Greek counterpart, it can also translate as 'sky'. Elijah was travelling in the same *direction* as Jesus would go – towards the sky. Elisha would have been staring in the same *direction* as the disciples would stare. God's Word explicitly states where Jesus was going – 'through the heavens' and into the presence of God in Heaven.

God's Word does not do the same for Elijah. It does not say that he went into the presence of God. Furthermore, where would his physical body have gone if Heaven were the domain of immaterial souls (assuming my own understanding of 'soul' to be incorrect)? The generally accepted view is that a saint goes to Heaven in immaterial form (soul/spirit) so the Elijah conundrum at least suggests that modification of this view is necessary.

We are not told that Elijah remained where he went. We do not come to the conclusion that an airplane transports people to the sky (or 'heaven') never to return. But have we come to this conclusion about Elijah simply because the word "heaven" is used – a word that also means 'sky'?

My understanding is that Elijah had to be removed from the sight of all who knew him (effectively everyone in Israel, considering his notoriety) so that Elisha could take up his mantle.

And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" Elisha said, "Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." So he said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." (2nd Kings 2:9-10)

Is it not possible that Elijah was taken out of the way miraculously *for Elisha's sake*? The transportation was confirmation to God's new chosen prophet that a double portion of Elijah's spirit would be his. To borrow an expression from elsewhere in Scripture, Elijah must decrease while Elisha must increase. Does our potential misinterpretation of Elijah's destination distract us from a more important character?

I believe so. And I further believe that this kind of error is repeated in a much more dangerous manner within orthodox Christian teaching when the belief of our souls

going to Heaven distracts us from what ought to be the believer's focus: future resurrection.

The Transfiguration

“Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

*While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. But Jesus came and touched them and said, “Arise, and do not be afraid.” When they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, “Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead.” **(Matthew 16:28-17:9)***

And He said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.” Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up on a high mountain apart by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them. And Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”— because he did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid.

*And a cloud came and overshadowed them; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” Suddenly, when they had looked around, they saw no one anymore, but only Jesus with themselves. **(Mark 9:1-8)***

But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.” Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him,

who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, that Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!" When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen. (Luke 9:27-36)

If Moses and Elijah did not ascend to Heaven either at death or in a chariot of fire, or if they did not go into *Abraham's Bosom*, then how do we explain their presence on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured? The three disciples who were present witnessed Jesus having a conversation with them so should it not be assumed that both Moses and Elijah were actually present there in some form?

I do not believe that the text warrants this understanding. Both Moses' and Elijah's appearances were part of a "*vision*" (Matthew 17:9). Why would it have to be literally them? While visions in the Bible often involved direct communication with real living persons, not least God Himself (Gen 15:1; Num 12:6; Ezek 1:1), there are also other examples of visions where the individuals evidently were not there. One example is found in Acts 16:9-10. Paul is called by God to go to Macedonia to preach the Gospel. God uses "*a man of Macedonia*" to tell Paul to do so: "*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*"

Was this man really where Paul was at the time, Troas? Given the understanding that, if we have an immaterial soul, it is housed within the body throughout this life, then presumably this man did not travel 'in spirit' to Troas to give Paul this message. In short, the Macedonian man was not there. God had used his image in a vision in order to relay a message.

Objects and creatures are also used in visions, which, one can reasonably assume, were not in actuality needed in order for the vision to fulfil its purpose (Acts 11:5; Revelation 9:17).

Each of the three Transfiguration accounts were preceded by the statement that some of the disciples would not see death until they saw the Kingdom of God (Matt 16:28; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27). Presumably this was referring to the visible return of

Christ to earth to rule - in which case, something that is still future. Mark's reference even adds the words "*the Kingdom of God after it has come **with power***", perhaps putting it into contrast with the mysterious way in which the Kingdom is here today.

On each of these three occasions we immediately read of the Transfiguration account, where three disciples witnessed a transformed Jesus with Moses and Elijah. I am assuming these three disciples were the ones Jesus said would not see death until they saw the Kingdom, and that this was the fulfilment of this prediction. So, in effect, they were witnessing the future in the present, much like John was in Revelation. All in all therefore, I see it as a vision of the future - Jesus returning in His glory. Moses and Elijah would not have had to be there in any actual form (physical or non-physical) themselves.

Samuel, Saul and the witch at En-Dor

Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor." So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes, and he went, and two men with him; and they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you." Then the woman said to him, "Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?" And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" And he said, "Bring up Samuel for me." When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman spoke to Saul, saying, "Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!" And the king said to her, "Do not be afraid. What did you see?" And the woman said to Saul, "I saw a spirit ^לאלהים – **ELOHIM**] ascending out of the earth." So he said to her, "What is his form?" And she said, "An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle." And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground and bowed down. Now Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" And Saul answered, "I am deeply distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God has departed from me and does not answer me anymore, neither by prophets nor by dreams. Therefore I have called you, that you may reveal to me what I should do." Then Samuel said: "So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? And the LORD has done for Himself as He spoke by me. For the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will

also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.” Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, and was dreadfully afraid because of the words of Samuel. And there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day or all night. (1st Samuel 28:3-20)

Samuel is dead (v3; 25:1). What other options exist that would explain his post-death conversation with Saul than that his soul/spirit lived on?

I had formerly accepted the option that this was a ‘familiar spirit’ imitating Samuel. The setting could easily lead us down the road of assuming that the usual foul play of necromancy was the reason for Samuel’s appearance. In other words, I believed it to be a demon and not Samuel. Closer inspection suggests not.

It is also necessary to explain why I cannot see this as an immaterial appearance of Samuel either. Several things are noteworthy. First of all, the witch saw “**a spirit** ascending out of the earth” (v13). If it is God’s intention to let us know that “*spirit*” here means the immaterial immortal component of man, then why would He contradict it in the verse below?

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

To say that our ‘spirits’ ascend to God at death, but that Samuel’s was under the earth, is a bit like ‘having our cake and eating it’. In fact, since this Ecclesiastes reference is used to teach that our immaterial spirit returns to God in Heaven at death, this calls into question the entire doctrine of *Abraham’s Bosom*. It is an Old Testament reference – hence Heaven is where even Samuel’s ‘spirit’ would have gone. Surely even those who subscribe then to the doctrine of *Abraham’s Bosom* should agree that Ecclesiastes 12:7 should have been translated as “*breath*” not “*spirit*” – otherwise it creates a problem with Samuel.

Note also that I have added into the text the Hebrew word that is translated as “*spirit*”. אֱלֹהִים (ELOHIM) is a familiar word to many like me who do not even know Hebrew, for it is a name applied to God (e.g. Genesis 1:1). The scope of the word goes beyond the name of the Creator (e.g. Psalm 82:6) but it is notable that Strong’s does not include ‘*spirit*’ as one of the possible translations. Whatever the witch saw, it was not “*a spirit*”. What she did see potentially, going by the scope of ELOHIM, was “**a judge**”. This not only describes Samuel accurately (1st Samuel 7:6,15), it also suits the context where Samuel pronounces a final **judgement** on Saul (28:16-19). In essence, the witch was claiming that she was seeing **the** judge of Israel “*ascending out of the earth*”.

Taking what has been stated so far, I must first correct my own understanding before challenging the common understanding also. The witch did **not** 'conjure a spirit' who mimicked Samuel. It is clearly Samuel who is talking to Saul (vv15-16). The use of the pronoun "you" proves a direct one-on-one conversation is occurring, with no mediation role performed by the witch. Neither did she perform any act of divination to 'disturb' Samuel in the first place. A woman seasoned in sorcery is not likely to cry out "with a loud voice" (v12) if all she met was a "familiar spirit" of Samuel. I would assume that Saul's asking to contact Samuel (v11) was not particularly disturbing to the witch, until the outcome proved to be something unexpected (vv12-13). She was evidently disturbed. Would a 'spirit', whether 'familiar' or 'real', have unsettled the witch?

The problem of interpreting ELOHIM as "spirit", added to the location of the 'spirit' according to Ecclesiastes 12:7, should also suggest that the witch was shocked as to **how** her 'contact' appeared, not just **who** he was – it was not a 'spirit'.

"An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle" (v14)

This undoubtedly physical language should cause us to seriously consider: was this a resurrected Samuel? Such an understanding would explain the shock of the witch who saw a judge "**ascending out of the earth**" and the direct conversation with Saul.

Those who have difficulty with such an interpretation may ask how Samuel returned to the grave. Did he die a second time? I would assume he did. If 'double-death' was experienced by the son of the widow of Zarephath (1st Kings 17), the son of the Shunammite woman (2nd Kings 4), the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7), and Lazarus (John 11), why would 'double-death' be reason to reject the idea of Samuel rising again?

2nd Corinthians 5:8

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

Is this an explicit statement that our immaterial souls immediately ascend to Heaven at the point of death? Where are the words 'soul', 'immediate' and 'Heaven', or variants of these words? I understand that, if we hold to the doctrine as biblical truth, it becomes natural to interpret 2nd Corinthians 5:8 in this light. It then becomes a proof-text for the doctrine, when all it does (removed from its surrounding context) is not contradict it. But by itself, the verse merely affirms that in order to be in the Lord's presence one must be '*absent from the body*'.

This expression, of course, is quite striking and is understandably used to support the doctrine of continued existence in a non-physical state. '*Absent from the body*' naturally conjures images of an ethereal experience. But I do believe that we have allowed our preconceived ideas about souls going to Heaven to influence a statement that does not include any such detail. Another problem is that Paul has made this statement within a context where he adamantly does **not** want such an experience!

*For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, **we shall not be found naked**. For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, **not because we want to be unclothed**, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2nd Corinthians 5:1-5)*

A language of longing is employed: Paul is longing for his new "tent". His present one causes him to groan and feel burdened but the new one is "from God". This is what he longs for. He does not want to be in an intermediate state of having no body; he does not want to be "naked". It is important that we establish Paul's desires because he returns to such language in verse 8 – the verse in question:

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

Has Paul accepted that he can't have this new body at the point of death and contented himself with non-physical experience in the interim? Quite a quick change

of mind! Is it not more consistent to connect verse 8 to his previously stated desires – is he not repeating his longing for an experience in the new body that God has prepared for him?

What may make such an interpretation unacceptable to some is that Paul talks about being absent from “the” body rather than “this” body. Again, at face value, this seems like non-physical language. Does “the body” refer to the human body in general or the human body as Paul knew it up to that point? Again, I believe that Paul has established this in the preceding verses.

He takes comfort in the knowledge that, even if his present body is destroyed, God has prepared another one for him (v1). In the meantime he groans because he must content himself with his present body (v2). Not that he is groaning to simply escape bodily experience in general (being “*naked*”) – he wants a new one that will swallow up mortality (vv3-4). God has prepared him for this very thing – the Holy Spirit being the pledge for this resurrection (v5). He can therefore take courage in this life, even though he still remains at “*home in the body*” and “*absent from the Lord*” (v6), because he lives this life by faith [in that new body which God has prepared] and not by sight [of the body in which he presently resides] (v7).

In light of all this, what does “*absent from the body*” mean in verse 8? What was “the body” in verse 6? It was the body in which he was “*at home*” presently. Being housed in this present body is what makes him “*absent from the Lord*”. So what would he be if he were absent from the body in which he presently lives? He would be “*present with the Lord*” (v8) and the preceding context has clearly stated that this means in the new body which God has prepared (vv1-4). In other words, “*absent from the body*” does **not** mean absent from bodily experience. It only means absence from the body as Paul knew it up to that point – or ‘the flesh’, as Paul often called it.

A valid question is raised against this hypothesis however: if Paul says he does not want to be “*naked*” (i.e. body-less) does this not imply that there is something that needs clothed? In other words, is there a soul/spirit inside the “*tent*”?

I take such language as figurative, not necessitating an actual immaterial soul/spirit. Just as verse 8 required an appreciation of the prior verses in order to understand what “the body” was, so the language in verses 1 to 4 requires knowledge of the previous chapter in order to appreciate that figurative language is being employed, that Paul is not asserting that there is a literal immaterial self that needs a house.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not

crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. (2nd Corinthians 4:7-16)

As far as my understanding of the epistle goes, Paul has been defending his work, and the work of companions such as Timothy (the use of the pronoun "we" seems to trace back to the epistle's first verse). They are bearers of "*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*" (4:6). However, such treasure is borne in "*earthen vessels*" – their physical bodies – which are being hard-pressed and crushed, feeling the effects of being forsaken and perplexed. The purpose of carrying the treasure of the Gospel in such a fragile 'container' is that the life of Jesus would be manifested within "*mortal flesh*"; in other words, the power of the resurrected Saviour is not likely to be attributed to the weak, oppressed, dying physical body of His messenger.

The messenger also feels the effects of death working in him in order that his audience may experience that "*treasure*" / "*life*" working in them (v.12). In essence, God's faithful messenger and God's obedient servant undergo a dual experience: the "*outward man*" is suffering while the "*inward man*" is being renewed by the hope that is found in the Gospel (v.16). No doubt this ought to be the experience of every one of us.

But do the expressions "*inward man*" and "*outward man*" point to the existence of a soul/spirit within each person's body? One of my issues with taking this literally as a soul/body divide is that Paul seems to apply this truth only to people like himself who are suffering for the Gospel (there is a clear "we" and "you" contrast throughout the chapter; Paul and his companions are the "we", the Corinthian church is the "you"). This would mean that everybody else's "*inward man*" is not being renewed daily, thus not immortal. Furthermore, if the soul were immortal why would it need

renewal anyway? Renewal, in the context, is the opposite of “*perishing*” – a reference to the process of death.

So I take it all as figurative language about inner hope in the midst of outer trials. I believe Paul is continuing with the analogy in chapter five. The “*inward man*” is looking for an “*outward man*” that is better than the perishing one he presently has, one that is suffering because of his beliefs. He needs a new “*tent*”. In reality (by which I mean, as I see it) ***there is no literal inner man***, but as human existence continues we are aware of an inner/outer divide and this is the best way for language to express it.

Many if not most of God’s people will have experienced a moment when biblical truth has given them hope, when they have been ‘refreshed’. As such, it seems to me that the “*inward man*” refers to our thought processes, or mind. This would not be the only occasion on which Paul spoke of renewing the mind.

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Therefore I would maintain that the context of 2nd Corinthians remains focused upon the physical state, whether the troubles our physical bodies face as a result of obedience or the benefits to our thought processes of the hope that lies ahead.

Most notably, however, in 2nd Corinthians 4:14, is the personal hope that Paul expresses concerning resurrection: “*He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you*”. As I see it, this becomes the key factor in chapter 5 – resurrection.

Another matter that may need discussed regarding chapter 5 is the role that Heaven plays in the first two verses:

*For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal ***in the heavens***. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is ***from heaven***...*

To suggest that this refers to Paul being *in* Heaven rather than in a resurrected body does not make sense to me. The new dwelling is “***from*** heaven”, not Heaven itself. At the time of writing it was “***in the heavens***” (much like the “*treasure in Heaven*” that Jesus referred to in Matthew 6:20, Mark 10:21, Luke 12:33, 18:22) but surely that

was because the recipient was not yet deemed ready to own it. The Bible may refer to a future inheritance *in* Heaven but this is no proof that this is where it will be received. For example, our food is stored *in* the cupboard; it comes *from* the cupboard; but we do not have to eat it *in* the cupboard to enjoy its benefits. So it is with the resurrected body: it is stored *in* Heaven, it comes *from* Heaven, but we do not have to *go to* Heaven to enjoy wearing it. All would agree anyway that the resurrected body is with the saint from the moment of his resurrection, therefore it must be removed *from* Heaven in order to be put on.

Perhaps a counter-argument would be that Paul was referring to a physical body that the disembodied soul receives immediately upon entrance into Heaven. I am not sure if proponents of such a view argue that this body is temporary or everlasting. However, a comparison between chapters 4 and 5, and the 15th chapter of Paul's first Corinthian letter suggests that he was referring to the same event in both contexts – which would then mean the time of the second coming of Christ.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. (1st Corinthians 15:20-23)

Knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. (2nd Corinthians 4:14)

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." (1st Corinthians 15:54)

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven, if indeed, having been clothed, we shall not be found naked. (2nd Corinthians 5:2)

For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. (2nd Corinthians 5:4)

The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. (1st Corinthians 15:47)

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven (2nd Corinthians 5:2)

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." (1st Corinthians 15:54)

For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up by life. (2nd Corinthians 5:4)

With this in mind, I think it best to look at 2nd Corinthians 5:8 in light of the resurrection truth that Paul had used in the immediate context, as well as in a previous epistle to Corinth. The bondservants of Christ longed for the 'putting off' of their oppressed, suffering physical bodies. They longed for the body that was reserved for them in Heaven. The day of receiving that resurrected spiritual body, Paul had taught (1st Corinthians 15:23), was the day of Christ's coming. Hence their first experience of being absent from their dying (or rather, dead) body will be at a time when the Lord has returned to be "*present with*" them.

Luke 23:43

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

Where was "Paradise" and how did Jesus go there on the day of His death? Was "Paradise" in Heaven? Was it in Abraham's Bosom?

In 2nd Corinthians 12:1-4 Paul describes visions and revelations he received and could be suggesting that "Paradise" was in "the third heaven", presumably where God dwells. But I am a little tentative in assuming that "Paradise" and "the third heaven" are synonymous.

This hesitancy is based on my assumption that Old Testament references to the Garden of Eden would also fall under this category of 'Paradise'. The Greek παράδεισος (paradeisos) can also mean 'garden'.

It seems to me that 'Paradise' is a place intended for man's enjoyment but, more importantly, **a place over which he rules**. This is based upon my understanding of the Garden of Eden.

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

I do not believe that expulsion from Eden prohibited man from ever ruling 'Paradise' again. Through the Man Christ Jesus, mankind would have its rulership restored.

What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honour. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen— even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. (Psalm 8:4-8)

After quoting this Psalm the author of Hebrews says the following:

*For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. **But now we do not yet see all things put under him.** (Hebrews 2:8)*

I would therefore tentatively suggest that the Bible's theme of man's restored dominion, which will be realised through the coming King, Jesus Christ, could also summarise the history and prophecy of 'Paradise'. In other words, I believe that 'Paradise' will be restored to this earth, and man (in the form of the Messiah and His co-heirs) will rule over it.

The three New Testament references to 'Paradise' (Luke 23:43; 2nd Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 2:7) are therefore, I believe, references to a place that is still future: 'Paradise restored', or 'Paradise resurrected' if you will. Obviously Luke 23:43 is understood as a "Paradise" that existed on the day of the death of the Lord Jesus and the thief, which is something I wish to discuss in a moment. 2nd Corinthians 12:4 will also be left to a later part of this section where I hope to explain why I believe Paul's visions were visions of the future.

This leaves Revelation 2:7:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.

The above verse seems to be reflected in Revelation 22:2 and 14 when "a new heaven and a new earth" are established. Though the word 'Paradise' is not mentioned in this verse, "the tree of life" is. There is throughout this chapter the clear impression that the Man Christ Jesus ("the Lamb") is still ruling. The final chapter of Revelation is displaying the redemption of the 'Paradise' that was lost at the beginning of Genesis.

I would tentatively suggest then that 'Paradise' is to be biblically understood as a place over which man rules as God intended, whether that be the original Garden of Eden, the future earthly Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and His co-heirs, or the final new heaven and new earth. The first and last mentions of 'Paradise' in the Bible would support this view. Passages like Luke 23 and 2nd Corinthians 12 should do the same.

But if Jesus promised a dying man that he would be in 'Paradise' on the very day that they both died, then something is wrong with my view – which seems all the more likely when we read Luke 23:43!

But before my suggestion about 'Paradise' is discarded we must consider how Jesus could have been in a place called 'Paradise' on the day of His crucifixion. For a start, this 'Paradise' could not have been in Heaven. Following His resurrection three days later,

*Jesus said to [Mary Magdalene], "Do not cling to Me, for **I have not yet ascended to My Father**; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" (John 20:17)*

This would suggest that Jesus and the thief were not in Heaven that day because Jesus would not ascend to the Father until His Ascension. Would they have met in *Abraham's Bosom* instead? This would require the assumption that 'Paradise' had been moved there at some point. It would also require transporting a physical garden into a non-physical spiritual realm; it would require a place of dominion being transformed into a place of rest and waiting. I do not ridicule such a notion but I do find cause to be suspicious when we must *deduce* these doctrines from the Bible. We are essentially assuming a story of 'what happened' with very little to go on.

So, with this limited information, what else could Jesus have meant when He said, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise"?

The best explanation that I have heard involves less assumption of 'what happened' and more concern with how the phrase was translated into English. The original Greek had no punctuation. If one comma is moved forward by just one word, then Jesus' words to the thief undeniably take on a new meaning:

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

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

In the first instance the timing of 'Paradise' is specific: 'today'. The thief will go there on that very day. In the second instance there is no specific time – all we know is that it is future.

Can I prove that the latter is what Jesus meant? No, but neither can the former be proved. God's Word gives us no authorisation to decide where the punctuation should go when we translate the inspired texts into English. Instead, the best course of action is surely to interpret the verse according to what we know to be doctrinally true elsewhere. And it is due to this specific grammatical ambiguity that we surely cannot employ Luke 23:43 as a proof-text for 'going to Heaven when we die'.

Of course, it would help if there were another occurrence of the expression, “*I say to you today*”. This would give credibility to the suggestion that it was an expression akin to ‘*verily verily I say unto you*’. One verse in Acts may help substantiate this.

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.
(Acts 20:26)

Paul’s testimony to the Ephesian elders uses what could be classed as a similar expression. “*I testify to you this day*” uses the same Greek word (σήμερον / sémeron – *this day*) as Jesus used with the thief, “*I say unto you today*”. I don’t think I am being presumptuous when I discard the idea that Paul was only declaring his innocence *for that day*. “*This day*” clearly belongs to the first half of the statement:

Therefore I testify to you this day - - - I am innocent of the blood

NOT

Therefore I testify to you - - -this day I am innocent of the blood

Is it not then plausible that the same can be said for the “*today*” in Jesus’ statement?

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

NOT

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

Finally, one must consider the request to which Jesus was responding with His famous statement.

Then he [the thief] said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” (Luke 23:42)

The hope of the thief was entrance into the Messiah’s kingdom. Once we note Jesus’ immediate response (“*you will be with Me in Paradise*”) the natural interpretation is to view “*Paradise*” as synonymous to “*kingdom*”. Given that the establishment of Messiah’s kingdom is yet future (Acts 1:6-7) this supports the interpretation that the thief’s ‘afterlife’ experience was not immediate.

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. “Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’ “Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”

This is a very difficult passage to address because of the varying levels at which people interpret it. For example, some will view it as a parable, others as an actual event, or both. Some will view its context as ‘the love of money’, others see it as a direct warning about Hell. However, the consensus is that, irrespective of these issues, Jesus is talking about real afterlife experience in a real afterlife place. I disagree with this, but believe it is necessary to address the other interpretive issues first before establishing why I have come to this view.

Issue 1: the use of names does not prove it to be a ‘true story’

Not all agree over whether the above account is a parable or describes an actual event (some may say both). It is the naming of a character – Lazarus – that has led many (including myself once) to regard this as a factual account and not a parable. But as much as this conclusion may provide explanation for the use of a man’s name, it raises many more questions as a result.

Here is an example of a proper name being used in a parable:

*“Also He spoke this **parable** to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The **Pharisee** stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘**God**, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘**God**, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)*

What is God’s name doing in a parable, if parables are only supposed to be about fictional unnamed characters? Perhaps even the mentioning of a specific sect – the Pharisees – is uncharacteristic of what we would expect from a parable. But Luke calls it a parable nonetheless. Though this argument is somewhat redundant because I believe Lazarus to be as fictional as the characters and elements in a lot of other parables, it does show us that we cannot invent rules for parables (e.g. ‘all characters **must** be fictional’; ‘if an individual or place is assigned as “*certain*” it is **not** a parable’).

Within the Gospels, the assigning of individuals or places as “*certain*” (‘*a certain man*’, ‘*a certain king*’, ‘*a certain city*’) often concerns, as expected, real people and places (e.g. Matthew 8:19). It may therefore, to us, seem unnatural that a parabolic character or place be assigned as “*certain*” also, but such is the case in these verses: Luke 13:6; 18:2; 19:11-12.

It is therefore wrong to assume that “*a certain man*” has to refer to a real person. If we understand the context to be a parable then it is perfectly acceptable that “*a certain man*” can be fictional, just as I would suppose the “*certain rich man*” to be in this account. The Greek word used in verse 19, translated as “*certain*”, has within its scope the meaning “*anyone*” (τις – tis). We don’t have to assume there was a particular rich man.

Furthermore, if parabolic characters may be assigned as “*certain*” individuals, what prevents a fictional character from being named if it suits the story’s purpose? To say that the use of a man’s name proves a story to be true is a manufactured rule for any branch of literature, let alone the Bible. Lazarus (meaning ‘God has helped’) is the person who received no assistance from a man who had the means to assist, but eventually found his help from God in Abraham’s bosom.

Notice also the end of the account – the rich man’s brothers would not be convinced of their danger even if Lazarus rose from the grave (v31). Jesus’ audience was a group of Pharisees – the same sect that refused to believe when a man called *Lazarus* did rise from the grave in John 11. Was Jesus employing the name “*Lazarus*” in the parable for this purpose? Would some of the listeners here be present when the dead Lazarus was raised, therefore proving by their rejection of the miracle that the statement by Abraham in the parable was correct? Though I find the parallels striking I cannot approach dogmatism on this, particularly as it is John, not Luke, who records the resurrection of Lazarus. But what this suggestion does is illustrate that the use of a name like Lazarus does not prove that this had to be a real story. There is no doubt that the meaning of the name “*Lazarus*” is relevant to the parable.

Furthermore, if the Lazarus of Luke 16 were a real man, the events in the account being accurate historical detail (or at least representative of details of *Sheol*), then why did Jesus and Luke fail to record the name of the rich man? Why should Lazarus be named but not the “*certain rich man*”?

Issue 2: the context strongly suggests it is a fictional parable

The context of the previous two chapters lends weight to the belief that ‘the rich man and Lazarus’ is a parable. There are two events described. The first is the complaints by the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus was socialising with “*the tax collectors and the sinners*” (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus responds to these complaints by telling a “parable” (singular). He proceeds with at least two parables (the lost sheep and the lost coin) though the latter is not described as such. One would assume then that these two parables are essentially one.

There then follows the account of the prodigal son. The format changes from a ‘*what if this happened to you?*’ story to an ‘*a certain man...*’ story. But no detail is added between these stories to suggest that the context has changed. The last thing we know is that Jesus spoke “*this parable*”. Does this not suggest that the prodigal son account is also part of this one parable – one parable that consists of several ‘sub-parables’? Why must we assume it to be a factual account? The context gives us no clue as to its factual authenticity.

Following immediately on from the parable of the prodigal son is the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-8). The only detail added by Luke between these stories is that Jesus now directed it at his disciples (16:1), but verses 14-18 show that the Pharisees were still listening. Does this not suggest that all this teaching remains

within the same social and biblical context as Luke 15:1? Would it not also suggest that ‘the unjust steward’ is part of this set of (sub) parables?

Verses 13 to 18 describe the second event that provides a context for our understanding of the account of the rich man and Lazarus (though it is not so much a new event as a development of the same event):

“... You cannot serve God and mammon.” Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him [Jesus]. And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God. “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail. “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery. “There was a certain rich man...”” (Luke 16:13-19)

The words “*you cannot serve God and mammon*” evidently went against Pharisaical practice and beliefs, prompting Christ’s condemnation of their hypocrisy. I would think that the reference to the law on divorce carried a symbolic suggestion of the Pharisees’ guilt – by serving mammon they were effectively divorcing themselves from servitude to God and committing adultery.

This context, which started back in chapter 15 verse 1, then flows naturally into another story (parable!) concerning the deceit of riches – ‘the rich man and Lazarus’. It begins with “*there was a certain rich man...*”

There is therefore every reason to view this account as linked to the parables of the unjust steward and the prodigal son (only this time more context has been provided by the short exchange between Christ and the Pharisees). Furthermore, there is every reason to link the unjust steward and the prodigal son to the “*parable*” spoken of at the beginning of chapter 15 (the lost sheep and the lost coin). Thus ‘the rich man and Lazarus’ is a parable.

Issue 3: this is not a warning about Hell

Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?” And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables (Luke 8:9-10)

If the mysteries of the Kingdom were to be hidden from the Pharisees, as Jesus stated, why would He then teach something ***in detail*** to warn them of things to come? Jesus had chosen to speak to non-disciples in parables when it came to the mysteries of the Kingdom of God so that they would not understand, and so that only the disciples *could* understand.

The Kingdom had come as a mystery (e.g. Matthew 13) and therefore anything that precedes the visible manifestation of the Kingdom would have to be considered part of the mystery. If there is an intermediate state for the saint prior to the return of Christ then this must be part of the mystery. And if this be the case, then Jesus would only communicate such truths in parables. ***He would not teach it clearly to the people from whom it should be hidden!*** But the standard interpretation of the account does exactly that. It is a passage that is regularly preached to those classed as 'non-Christian' in the hope that they will respond to the parable by faith and escape Hell. But they would need to be a disciple in the first place to understand it!

The common application of this passage also ignores the fact that the Pharisees were Jews, and therefore God's redeemed people. It is not about Hell. Plainly and simply, Luke 8:9-10 confirms that the Pharisees would not understand parables. The audience were Pharisees, therefore the purpose and doctrine that underpinned the parable was hidden from them.

In one respect at least, this parable has a strong contrast with the parable of the unjust steward. The first was spoken to the disciples while the Pharisees listened in. The second was spoken to the Pharisees while the disciples listened in. In both cases, however, if we are to be consistent with Luke 8:9-10, the only audience who would be able to discern the parables would be the disciples. The message was for the disciples and gave them a reason for obeying the lesson from the previous parable: do not love and serve riches, for those who do so are judged with accuracy according to how they used them.

“Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:29-31)

Notice the link between these verses and what preceded the parable (vv. 13-18). Jesus had said that *“the law and the prophets were until John”*. Abraham, in the parable, says that the rich man's brothers *“have Moses and the prophets”* to convince them of what they should do. Jesus made reference to a law on

divorce/adultery and seemingly linked it to the Pharisees' infidelity to God (they were serving another god before Jehovah: "*mammon*").

Within the parable, it is easy to follow the rich man's logic – had Lazarus been resurrected he could have warned the brothers. But the conclusion is this: what Moses and the prophets had written was enough to warn the brothers of the danger ahead. Contained within the Hebrew Scriptures was sufficient detail for knowing and following God's will. Outside of the parable, and among the Pharisaical audience, there was an inability to reconcile what Jesus was saying about riches to what was written in the law and the prophets. Jesus is not changing the Scriptures they profess to trust in; He is fulfilling them – they just simply didn't understand the Scriptures in the first place!

Jesus could have explained this more clearly but He chose to speak to them in parables. In other words, we have no authority to take the account of the rich man and Lazarus as a clear expression of what happens after death. The purpose of the parable regarded riches and judgement – this was the context, not the afterlife.

Issue 4: it is an exaggerative story; it cannot be trusted to detail realities

It must be admitted that the details of this parable are unique. Jesus seems to use an 'immediate afterlife' story to tell the parable. If such an intermediate state does not exist was Jesus then misleading his audience with a false doctrine, and consequently us also? Should He not have clarified somewhere that this sort of afterlife situation doesn't really occur and that He was just employing this as a story-telling device?

Though I appreciate the sentiment I believe that we are importing our expectations, not only into how Jesus should have spoken, but into how first century Jews should have expected to be spoken to. How do we know that the listeners would have heard this account and automatically have thought, 'this man is saying there *is* conscious experience in Hades'? How do we know that the Pharisees in particular even held to such a doctrine at that time? All we know is that Jesus was telling a story.

Bear in mind one expression by Jesus in the parable:

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom."
(Luke 16:22)

Many Bible teachers look at the words "*Abraham's Bosom*" and assert that the Jew of that time was familiar with this as a place where one's soul/spirit went after death. I have seen no evidence for this, least of all within the Bible. However, the

same teachers may well be ignoring other words within the same sentence that ***did*** carry significance to the disciple. As it was only the disciples who would understand parables, they could think back to a prior parable made by Jesus and discover a meaning behind Lazarus being “*carried by the angels*”:

*He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, ***and the reapers are the angels***. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. ***The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*** (Matthew 13:37-43)*

Jesus here established the role that angels will play in a judgmental capacity. It is not a role that is carried out at each individual’s death but at “*the end of the age*”. Should the disciples’ minds then not have understood the words of verse 22 as a reference to Lazarus ***at the end of this age*** – in other words, the resurrection?

That said, there is also a sense of this ‘present age’ to the parable in that the rich man asked for Lazarus to go back and warn his five brothers who were still alive and well. The fact that both this age and “the end of this age” are employed within the parabolic setting should warn us against using the story to extrapolate afterlife/eschatological doctrines. Its sole focus is upon the present-day actions of disciples, with a caveat of judgement for wrong use of riches.

The popular interpretation of this account has it set at a time prior to the Lord’s return, meaning that the rich man, Lazarus and Abraham would be without their resurrected bodies. Their physical bodies (or what remains of them) are in the grave. Following popular doctrinal lines, this would infer that all three characters presently exist as soul/spirits only.

However, physical language is used. The rich man *opened his eyes* and saw Lazarus at a distance. He *cried out*. He asked that Lazarus would be permitted to *dip his finger in water* in order to cool his *tongue*. He was feeling torment in a *flame*.

The idea that Lazarus and Abraham were in Heaven must also be questioned. How could the rich man see them from where he was? The Lord Jesus had to pass *through* the heavens to go to the Father’s right hand (Hebrews 4:14) so the location of God the Father’s dwelling place must be beyond the reach of even the furthest

discovered galaxy. The rich man, on the other hand, died, was buried, then lifted up his eyes in *Hades*– the place from which he saw Lazarus. If these were true events, how could the rich man have seen Lazarus, with or without his physical eyes?

Returning to the recurrent term, *Abraham's Bosom*, I have found myself curious of its origin, location and meaning. This is its only occurrence in the Bible. Having briefly searched the internet to find out more about the history of the term I am none the wiser. Its origin is a matter of speculation – likewise how first century Jews understood the term. It is for this reason that I find it hard to accept such a place existed in *Sheol/Hades*.

Given the aforementioned fact that punctuation was not used in the inspired Greek text I am tempted to think that the capital 'B', which many apply, is unnecessary. Abraham took part in the story. He was there when it happened. As such, I don't think it facetious or irreverent at all to suggest that the location of '*Abraham's Bosom*' was between his neck and waist. Reclining against someone's bosom was a place of privilege during the time of Jesus' ministry (John 13:23). Is it not possible that the rich man saw Lazarus in a place coveted by all sincere Jews – the bosom of the father of their faith? To suggest that all the faithful go to a place like this would be to suggest a big bosom!

I think this is a reasonable argument, though I must emphasise my belief that this scene only took place *in the minds* of Jesus' audience, not in actuality. For me, this is a parable, designed to provoke the rich Pharisees who were listening (16:14) to consider the true value of their earthly riches, how they treated those they looked down upon, and – most importantly – how God will judge *precisely* according to how to we treat others. Not that they would understand but the warning was there.

I believe that this last point is strongly supported by Jesus' narrative use of the "*crumbs*" and "*water*". Lazarus had reached such a point of desperation that he longed for even the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. When the time of judgment comes, however, it is the rich man who is desperate for just a drop of water.

If this were a true story, should we really expect a starving man to crave for crumbs when he needs a meal? Furthermore, Lazarus was outside at the gate, *not* under the rich man's table – what man, in an act of charity, would sweep up his crumbs and bring them out to a beggar? Ought we really to think that Lazarus hoped for such an act? I can only make sense of this if Jesus was using hyperbole in order to express the desperation of the Lazarus character.

Likewise, what use is a drop of water to a man suffering in a flame? Why did the rich man only ask for his tongue to be touched with a drop from a man's finger? Why not a drink? Why not removal from the flame? I can only assume it is because there was no real flame, there was no real water and there was no rich man. The whole story, to me, is part of an inflammatory parable. **The desperation of the man he neglected became the measure by which the rich man was judged.**

For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. (Matthew 7:2)

I think the most important character in the whole parable is the rich man – for it is his fate that would have riled the Pharisees most of all. Having already shown their disregard for 'the sinners' with whom Jesus socialised (Luke 15:1-2), the treatment of 'the lost' had clearly become a relevant subject in this part of Luke's gospel – enough to warrant sufficient parables to stretch into the next chapter. Why therefore should 'the rich man and Lazarus' not also be part of this section? In the parable, Lazarus could represent a 'lost' man who was 'found'.

Instead, however, we are taught that it is an insight into the 'afterlife'. Details of Hell's suffering and Heaven's comfort are taken from it. A key afterlife location (at least, prior to the Resurrection) is discovered – *Abraham's Bosom*.

But aside from the aforementioned list of objections to this interpretation of the text, there are still other unanswered questions. Why would Abraham have been given authority over a place inhabited by the dead? Where was this promised to him in Genesis? Are we not missing a more evident promise that would have been closer to his heart (or 'bosom')? The promised inheritance (Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-18; 15:1-21; 17:1-22) was an earth-related promise, not an 'afterlife' promise.

If *Abraham's Bosom* and the rest of *Hades/Sheol* are two separated parts of the same location, why would it require angels to carry Lazarus to his part but the rich man to do no more than be buried and open his eyes? Whether *Abraham's Bosom* was in *Hades/Sheol* or Heaven, how was it possible for a verbal conversation to take place between two locations separated by "a great gulf"? What comfort is there in an 'afterlife' where the righteous dead witness the torment of the unrighteous dead? What did Lazarus do or believe to be designated a 'righteous man', as he is often used to represent? Is the account telling us that rich people go to Hell and beggars go to Heaven? Is the parable/story even related to the distinction between redeemed and unredeemed?

Looking at the text more closely, I find the events far too bizarre to be taken as literal. But as a parable, where only one central truth needs to resound, it is understandable and relevant to the context. The details of conversations, physical sufferings, angelic actions all serve as a platform to support the parable's one main point on judgment – so they do not need to be consistent with real life (or 'afterlife') experiences.

John 14:1-6

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.” Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

The mention of a place being prepared ‘*in My Father’s house*’, made more appealing by there being ‘*many mansions*’, seems to fit the perceived promise of Heaven to God’s people. This was one of the earliest Bible passages that I had memorised as child and, though there is obviously a great benefit in children being able to repeat Bible passages, there is also a danger in misleading them if the verses are not explained properly (or are made directly applicable to the child when the text may give no such authority).

There are three strong reasons, I believe, that Jesus was not promising Heaven as a destination here. The first is found in the timing of the transformation that He was speaking about; the second in to *whom* He was directly speaking; the third in the conspicuous absence of such a Heaven-bound promise throughout the rest of His discourse in John 14-17.

My first objection to this passage being used as a general promise of Heaven to God’s people is the time at which He would receive the disciples to Himself. Jesus clearly stated that this gathering to be with Him was when He would “*come again*” (v3). It was not a promise of seeing Jesus again at the point of death.

There is an evident period of time during which the Lord would be away from His disciples, preparing a place for them. Only after the preparation is made would He come again for them. I do not believe that this could refer to the ascension of the disciples’ souls to Heaven after their physical death – where does such a doctrine state that a “*coming again*” of Jesus is required? This doctrine is positioned **before** His return.

Where was Jesus speaking of going when He told the disciples that He would be preparing a place for them? I had formerly assumed this to primarily mean the Cross. After all, what place can anyone share with God if there has been no redemptive price paid on their behalf? However, though Jesus’ destination necessitated a

journey *via* Calvary (He could not begin preparing a place without first shedding His blood), I do not see that the Cross was where He would be preparing a place – not within this context anyway.

One reason I say this is that the ‘*Upper Room Discourse*’ (John 13-17), from which the text is taken, does not include any direct reference to the Cross itself. For sure, the Cross is referenced in earlier chapters of John (e.g. 2:19; 3:14; 8:28; 10:11,15,17) but by this stage of the Gospel it is the inner circle of disciples who are being spoken to and the monologue that transpires is directed towards their conduct as faithful disciples while He is gone, and the heavenly assistance they will be receiving. It seems that this assistance is dependent upon Jesus being in the right place – the required location for preparing a place for the disciples.

Near the beginning of the whole discourse Jesus had said that He was going somewhere they ***could not come*** (13:33). Does this wording not suggest He is referring to somewhere other than the Cross? After all, it was physically possible for any of the disciples to follow Him there (proved by John’s presence at Calvary as an onlooker). Furthermore, when in later life many of the disciples *did* pick up their ‘cross’ and die for their Lord, they *did* follow Him there.

There are other occurrences in earlier chapters of John which show Jesus referring to an unfamiliar destination to which none of the Jews could follow Him. These verses, in my opinion, support the notion that the destination of John 14:3 (and indeed all of John 13-17) is not the Cross, but Heaven. Not only this, but it seems that this is a place that man is forbidden from entering.

Then Jesus said to them, “I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come.” (John 7:33-34).

Jesus answered and said to them, “Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going. (John 8:14)

Then Jesus said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin. Where I go you cannot come.” (John 8:21)

From John 14:3 onward, the following verses in the ‘*Upper Room Discourse*’ show that Jesus had Heaven as ***His*** destination in view.

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, **because I go to My Father.** (John 14:12)*

*You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, **‘I am going to the Father,’** for My Father is greater than I. (John 14:28)*

*“But now **I go away to Him who sent Me,** and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ (John 16:5)*

*“...**I go to My Father** and you see Me no more” (John 16:10)*

*“A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because **I go to the Father.**” (John 16:16)*

*“I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, **I leave the world and go to the Father.**” (John 16:28)*

*“And now, **O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself,** with the glory which I had with You before the world was.” (John 17:5)*

*“Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, **and I come to You**”. (John 17:11)*

*“But now **I come to You...**” (John 17:13)*

Though this point does not directly relate to the overall argument regarding the disciples’ destination (a point I will come to shortly), I feel it is important to emphasise the explicit place that Jesus had in mind in John 14:3 – Heaven. **It was in Heaven that He would be preparing a place for His disciples.** To me, the context of John 13-17 (and beyond) seems to support the idea that Jesus was referring to His heavenly role as High Priest – interceding for *His people* as they sought to live holy lives as true disciples.

And it would therefore only be after His role as *heavenly* High Priest is completed that He would “*come again and receive*” the disciples to Himself. Wherever the disciples’ ultimate destination would be, the context of John 14 does not support the popular doctrine of ‘*going to Heaven **when we die***’.

My second point regards the importance of understanding to whom Jesus was making the promise in John 14:3. What makes the church believe that the passage applies to all of God’s redeemed people? The words are part of an intimate

conversation between Jesus and His remaining eleven disciples. There are statements within the discourse that evidently could not be applied to all of us, so how can we tell which verses may apply to us? The following verses could hardly have been stated with all of us in view:

*“These things I have spoken to you **while being present with you.**” (John 14:25)*

*“And now **I have told you before it comes,** that when it does come to pass, you may believe.” (John 14:29)*

*“And you also will bear witness, because **you have been with Me from the beginning.**” (John 15:27)*

*“**They will put you out of the synagogues;** yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.” (John 16:2)*

“And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you. But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.” (John 16:4-6)

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12)

Then some of His disciples said among themselves, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” They said therefore, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is saying.” Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’? Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.” (John 16:17-20)

“Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.” (John 16:32)

“While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.” (John 17:12)

I believe we must be very careful not to turn promises that were made to a closed group into general promises for all of us. We cannot use John 15:16 to say that Jesus chose and ordained each one of us personally to go and bear fruit for Him – that statement was made to the disciples. If we are to believe this doctrine we must find it elsewhere in the Bible. We cannot take John 14:26 as a personal promise that the Holy Spirit will remind us of every word Jesus said – that statement was made to the disciples.

As such, therefore, surely we should judge the meaning of John 14:3 according to who was being addressed. This should then warn us about using the verse to support a doctrine when the context does not apply to us.

Interestingly, the following promises were also made to the disciples specifically, and *may* provide a clue to what Jesus meant by the place being prepared for them.

So Jesus said to them, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28)

“But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Luke 22:28-30)

Places of privilege were promised to the disciples in the earthly Kingdom of Christ. With “*thrones*” being mentioned, this would suggest some sort of royal position. Through His intercessory role as their heavenly High Priest, would the ascended Jesus not be preparing a place for these eleven disciples – ensuring that they persevered in the faith in order to reap the promise of such a royal reward?

There seems to be a strong hint of this kingdom promise at the beginning of John 14. Jesus mentions “*mansions*” (or “*dwelling places*”) that are already in His Father’s house. I do not think that the “*mansions*” are the prize for the disciples but are in fact **the assurance of the prize**. Consider the wording: “*In My Father’s house are many mansions...I go to prepare a place...*” Jesus is saying that the “*mansions*” already exist but the language suggests that the “*place*” for the disciples still has to be prepared. In other words, He is assuring the disciples of **why** the promise of a dwelling place for them can be trusted. ‘There are already many mansions in My Father’s house. Do you not think I can be trusted to prepare a place for **you** as well?’ In other words, the mansions in Heaven were not even being promised to the disciples, let alone us!

Irrespective, as previously argued, it is the Lord Jesus who comes to where the disciples are – not the opposite. “*That where I am, there you may be also*” is stated

immediately after Jesus said “*I will come again*”. I believe there is no evidence here of the place of co-habitation being Heaven. In fact, the repeated point made in the ‘*Upper Room Discourse*’ is that Jesus will see them again – **the focus is upon renewing company, not the location of that renewal**. In other words, the remark, “*that where I am, there you may be also*” was not intended to make the reader think of Heaven, but rather to make the disciple think of seeing Jesus again.

A third cause to doubt the view that Jesus could have been referring to the soul’s ascension to Heaven lies in the conspicuous absence of any other mention of it in the ‘*Upper Room Discourse*’. Already I have given reasons why I do not think John 14:3 is referring to it. However, I think it is even harder to argue for its appearance throughout the rest of the text.

A read of John 13-17 will show Jesus speak to His disciples about their conduct of loving one another and abiding in His love by obedience (13:34-35; 15:1-17); His going away to a place they could not come (13:33; 16:5-6); His revelation of the Father (14:7-11); asking the Father for things in His name (14:12-14); the coming comfort and ministry of the Holy Spirit (14:16-18,26; 15:26; 16:7-15); His return so that they would see Him again (14:19-24, 28-29 [*where is the evidence that ‘seeing’ Him again is a spiritual experience in this age? It is not in the text; verse 28 explicitly says that they will be seeing Him at His return*]; 16:16-23); their coming persecution (15:18-25; 16:1-4, 31-32); and a prayer on their behalf, as He will be leaving them (John 17).

Considering the emotional trauma that the disciples were about to experience and the Lord’s clear intent to comfort them, I find it significant that there is no mention of them seeing Him again in Heaven at the point of death. If such a doctrine were truth then it would not only have been a major issue to share with them at this point but would also have been an enormous encouragement to them. However, Jesus’ only mention of seeing them again is set within the context of Him “*coming again*”. Heaven is not mentioned. The only one going there is the Son of God Himself.

I would therefore ask, why is the doctrine of ‘going to Heaven when we die’ considered a fundamental truth of the Bible (or *considered at all*) when the Lord Jesus’ departing words of comfort to the disciples made no mention of it?

2nd Corinthians 12:1-4

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago— whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

I am not sure how often this passage is used to support the doctrine in question. I would venture to guess rarely, if at all. However, the fact that Paul mentions an experience of being in “*the third heaven*” may give cause to consideration that this is the place where all saints go.

But Paul only went to “*the third heaven*” and “*Paradise*” in a vision (v1). When it comes to visions one must also be careful not to over-analyse specifics. I have already argued, using Acts 11:5, 16:9-10 and Revelation 9:17, that the “*vision*” of the Transfiguration recorded in three Gospels did not necessitate Moses and Elijah being alive at the time. I further argued that it was a vision of the future. I believe there is cause to expect the same with Paul here.

I think there may be a significant relevance of Paul’s vision to “*the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God*” in which “*the tree of life*” resides (Revelation 21:10; 22:2). Paul’s account of his visions is the only place where I’m aware of something related to “*Paradise*” (“*the tree of life*”) and something related to “*the third heaven*” (“*the holy city, Jerusalem*”) being potentially combined in the same context. If so, this would set the events of Paul’s visions into the far distant future.

His choice of words “*whether in the body...or...out of the body*”, as tempting as they may be to understand within a material-immaterial context, must be understood within the context of 2nd Corinthians. I have already emphasised what I believe Paul meant in chapter 5 when he talked about being “*absent from the body*”. This expression was to be equated to being “*present with the Lord*” in his resurrected body. So, now that Paul is wondering if his visions and revelations were ‘in our out-of-body experiences’, we have a helpful context in which to appreciate what he meant. As with chapter 5 (where he says “*absent from the body*”) “*out of the body*” does not refer to an ethereal experience but to experience that was not in his present body.

Though most agree that the “*man*” whom Paul knew “*fourteen years ago*” was himself, I believe the language carries this mysterious tone because Paul was wondering if it were himself as a resurrected saint, and possibly in the ‘*new heaven and new earth*’ . Or at least he felt that was possible – but only God knew for sure. This could explain why he was not permitted to utter what he heard.

He was given the privilege of hearing things that were not passed on to the readers of the epistle. There is a similarity here with the apostle John, who was also transported in visions to the future. And even though John wrote down a lot of these experiences, there were also things that he was not permitted to write (Revelation 10:1-4). Daniel is another example (Daniel 12). The point I wish to make here is that Paul, like John and Daniel, was not ‘taken to Heaven’ (or any other time or place) in order to prove that this is where all saints go, but for purposes – relating to future events – that were not shared with us.

Philippians 1:15-24

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defence of the gospel. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

As I understand the above context, Paul's faithfulness as an apostle had already had the desired effect. Though he was imprisoned, others were preaching Christ as a result of Paul's preaching, irrespective of their motives. His consequential suffering left him with a dilemma that, though it touched upon his deepest desires, was somewhat hypothetical because it was beyond his control: 'would I rather die or continue suffering for the Gospel?' By faith he could see gain in both eventualities. Continuing to serve the saints with his life would present more opportunities for "fruit from my labour". Dying would mean being "with Christ, which is far better". Paul felt no further need to divulge on this latter option – the benefits to death were obvious to him and his readers.

The concept of reward is clearly in his mind. He has lived by faith, believing that God will reward him for all he has done thus far. Continuing on in life in a similar vein would only serve to accumulate more reward for him. When death would eventually come then he could enjoy the reward – which is why the second option was the preferred one.

But what is it to "be with Christ"? Immediate entrance into Heaven? Immediate fellowship with the Lord? The text does not say. I believe that we, the church, have been guilty of reading immediacy into the statement. I also believe that, when Paul later describes his motives for obeying the Lord Jesus, it is clear that going to Heaven at the point of death is not in his thoughts.

*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; **that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection**, and the fellowship of His sufferings, **being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.** (Philippians 3:8-11)*

This section seems to clarify that the reward Paul sought (aside from the honour of suffering with Christ in this life) was not experienced at the point of death **but at the point of resurrection**. Just as Christ died, Paul also wished to die. Why? Because death was the only door through which the great reward could be realised. Paul knew that his death would lead to him being raised from the dead as Christ was.

This is precisely the meaning behind *“being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead”*. It also informs why Paul could say, in the opening chapter, that it was better *“to depart and be with Christ”*. To *“depart”* is synonymous with *“being conformed to His death”*. To *“be with Christ”* is synonymous with passing through death in order to *“attain to the resurrection from the dead”* – an exact conforming to the process that His Saviour underwent. How was Christ raised – by ‘soul/spirit’ only? No, it was evidently a physical resurrection and this was therefore Paul’s hope as well.

Though I held the same view as the majority within the church, I believe it was a mistake to assume that there could be no lapse of time between ‘departing’ and ‘being with Christ’. From an historical perspective, Paul has ‘departed’ but he is not yet ‘with Christ’.

However, I do believe that, *from Paul’s perspective*, there would be **no** lapse of time between the two steps in the process. As far as I understand the Bible, death means non-existence – and this by implication means non-experience. Paul would therefore have ‘shut his eyes’ in death and, as far as his experience is concerned, will open them ‘immediately’ in the resurrection. This will hopefully be dealt with better in the section that discusses the nature of the soul.

I also think we have overlooked the word *“flesh”* (σάρξ – sarx). It is evident that Paul knew he would continue to abide in his *“flesh”* (1:24-25) even though it would have been more pleasing for him to *“depart”* from it. It would seem to us that a natural understanding of ‘departing from flesh’ is to depart from physicality into an immaterial experience. But we must be careful here. In the Bible, *“flesh”* and physicality are not synonymous.

The resurrected body is not described as a body of “flesh”. It is considered different enough to warrant the adjective “spiritual” in 1st Corinthians 15:42-46. Consider also these other references:

“...the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11)

“...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1st Corinthians 15:50)

“So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin” (Romans 7:25)

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing” (John 6:63)

That the resurrection body is physical is undeniable but yet it still is not described as “flesh”. There are six references in Ezekiel, which either speak of the resurrected body receiving a “heart of flesh” as opposed to stone, or they detail the “sinews” and the “flesh” that cover the bones of the resurrected bodies (but no “blood”). However, of the 300+ other occurrences of the word “flesh” in Scripture, none relate to the resurrection. So it is biblically valid to say that one will see God ‘outside’ of the “flesh” while still maintaining that such existence will be physical.

“Flesh” is only one form of physicality – it is the physicality of the first man, the “natural man”. The “second man” is physical also but he is **not** “flesh”. A general knowledge of Paul’s letters shows what he thinks of “the flesh” – it is a million miles from the physical nature of the resurrected body. Here is a long list of examples of how Paul considered the term “flesh”:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh [sarki]. (Romans 2:28)

I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh [sarkos]. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. (Romans 6:19)

For while we were in the flesh [sarki], the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. (Romans 7:5)

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal [sarkinos], sold under sin. (Romans 7:14)

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh [sarki]) nothing good dwells (Romans 7:18)

So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh [sarki] the law of sin. (Romans 7:25)

For what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh [sarkos], God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh [sarkos], on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh [sarki], that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh [sarka] but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh [sarka] set their minds on the things of the flesh [sarkos], but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally [sarkos] minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal [sarkos] mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then those who are in the flesh [sarki] cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh [sarki] but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. (Romans 8:3-9)

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh [sarki], to live according to the flesh [sarka]. For if you live according to the flesh [sarka] you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:12-13)

...those who are the children of the flesh [sarkos], these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. (Romans 9:8)

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh [sarkos], to fulfill its lusts. (Romans 13:14)

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh [sarka], not many mighty, not many noble, are called. (1st Corinthians 1:26)

...and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh [sarx] should glory in His presence. (1st Corinthians 1:28-29)

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh [sarx] and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. (1st Corinthians 15:50)

For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly [sarkikē] wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you. (2nd Corinthians 1:12)

Therefore, when I was planning this, did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh [sarka], that with me there should be Yes, Yes, and No, No? **(2nd Corinthians 1:17)**

...clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh [sarkinais], that is, of the heart. **(2nd Corinthians 3:3)**

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh [sarka], yet now we know Him thus no longer. **(2nd Corinthians 5:16)**

But I beg you that when I am present I may not be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh [sarka]. For though we walk in the flesh [sarki], we do not war according to the flesh [sarka]. **(2nd Corinthians 10:2-3)**

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh [sarki]? **(Galatians 3:3)**

But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh [sarka], and he of the freewoman through promise **(Galatians 4:23)**

But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh [sarka], and he of the freewoman through promise **(Galatians 4:29)**

For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh [sarki], but through love serve one another. **(Galatians 5:13)**

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh [sarkos]. For the flesh [sarx] lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh [sarkos]; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh [sarkos] are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. **(Galatians 5:16-21)**

And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh [sarka] with its passions and desires. **(Galatians 5:24)**

For he who sows to his flesh [sarka] will of the flesh [sarkos] reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. (Galatians 6:8)

...among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh [sarkos], fulfilling the desires of the flesh [sarkos] and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. (Ephesians 2:3)

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh [sarkos], by the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2:11)

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly [sarkos] mind (Colossians 2:18)

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh [sarkos]. (Colossians 2:23)

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh [sarki] (Philippians 3:3)

Bear in mind particularly this last reference, for it is from the same epistle where Paul stated that he would “live on/remain in the flesh” (Philippians 1:22,24). Paul was not referring to general physical existence here – but to a specific physical existence: that of his “flesh and blood”. The opposite (“to be with Christ”) should therefore **not** be read as non-physical existence, but rather the physical existence he desires and states as resurrection-physical-existence (3:8-11).

In 1st Corinthians 15:42-46 the resurrection body is described as “spiritual”. It is **categorically** not “flesh”! The resurrection body is to be “with Christ” at His coming and is indeed “far better”.

Revelation 6:9-11

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

Revelation 6 is, I believe, the most difficult to address. While others do not explicitly say what most of us purport them to say, this one describes life after death but *before* the resurrection. In my opinion, if any Bible passage were to be used to support the idea of continued existence after death, it should be this one.

Nevertheless, upon reflection, I think there are some key points regarding the text that undermine our right to use it to establish such an important doctrine. The main point regards the book of which the statement is a part. Revelation comprises the **visions** given to the apostle John regarding "*things which must shortly ["quickly" in Young's Literal Translation] take place*" (1:1). The repetitive use of "*like*" within the book serves to emphasise that John was seeing and hearing things that could not adequately be articulated to the reader. The language is therefore visionary.

One imagines from John's reaction to seeing the glorified Christ (1:17) that the Lord's physical appearance was beyond frightening. One must also recognise, however, that, although He is described as having feet like fine brass, hair like white wool, a tongue like a two-edged sword and a voice like many waters, the Lord is more fearsome in appearance than what those words could ever communicate. If truth be told, our imaginations conjure up ridiculous images that probably make a mockery of what John saw. In essence, though I believe the book describes future world and heavenly events, it is done so through the use of figurative language. Nobody denies this linguistic feature of the book.

John evidently saw visions within the book that were not even *visually represented* as the events which would one day transpire. For example, does Revelation 12 mean that an actual woman clothed with the sun, moon and stars will give birth to a child who will be targeted by a dragon, before the woman herself flies into the wilderness with eagles' wings? This is what John **saw**!

Will there be an actual beast rising out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, who will be universally worshipped (Revelation 13)? This is what John **saw**! John saw the visions – he did not necessarily see the reality of what each vision meant.

This brings me to the vision of **the fifth seal** in chapter 6. John saw souls under the altar. Evidently these had been martyred for the proclamation of God's message. Some kind of frustration was being expressed because their blood had not been avenged, after which (presumably) a representative of God assured them that justice would come. Their grievance was allayed by being clothing in white robes. For such a transaction to take place, the souls had to be alive. Those who are dead in entirety cannot carry out a conversation nor put on robes. Hence it is understandable why this text is used in support of the doctrine that says the saint goes to Heaven at the point of death.

That said, Death and Hades cannot ride horses, and yet this occurs after the opening of **the fourth seal** (6:7-8). Nobody suggests that this is describing how the event will occur in actuality.

If the stars in the heavens literally fell to the earth, the planet would be extinct in a second and there would be no need for all the men on earth to start speaking to rocks – and yet this is what John saw after **the sixth seal** was opened (6:12-17). Those who take the future literal interpretation of Revelation (including me) have no difficulty in viewing this seal as describing catastrophic cosmic events but few would argue that the sky will really look like a scroll being rolled up (v14). We accept that the events are portrayed through figurative language.

Why then does the fifth seal have to be taken so literally as to describe an actual conversation that was/will be carried out in Heaven? Is there no validity to the suggestion that an “*altar*” was present in the vision simply because the souls concerned have paid the ultimate price, just like a sacrificial animal within the Tabernacle or Temple? Or were these souls literally living under an altar in the heavenly Tabernacle, crying out for justice?

Is there biblical significance to something being “*under the altar*”?

Then he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, and the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar. It is a sin offering. (Leviticus 5:9)

The blood of the sacrificial animal was to be “*drained out at the **base of the altar***”. Within the earthly tabernacle arrangement the altar here described was not in the Holy Sanctuary (‘*Holiest of All*’) but in the outer court (Exodus 40:1-8). One significance of the Holy Sanctuary is that this was a place into which only the High Priest could go – made even more significant because it prefigured the present-day ministry of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9). The souls “*under the altar*” are therefore, for a start, not with the Lord Jesus. They are in a place from which animal remains are discarded. If they were to be in Heaven one would hope that their experience of

being the sacrifice had ended! Not only this, one would hope that frustration over God's delayed vengeance would not be an issue. Is it not better to see the language describing the souls as those who are dead because of martyrdom, and nothing more than this? The giving of white robes could be pre-figurative of a post-resurrection event.

Or were these souls (non-physical beings) actually clothed in physical white robes? If they were actually being clothed in white robes then "*under the altar*" would be an odd place for this to occur – a place no doubt associated with disgust and foul stench. Could the language not simply be telling us that God recognises the sacrifices made for Him by the martyrs and will reward such people?

The account of Cain and Abel shows that there is certainly biblical precedent for 'conversations' between the dead and their Creator. However, this precedent is evidently of a linguistic nature. Abel's blood did not have a voice but God recognised a death that was the result of obedience to Him and the recognition was described as if the blood were actually speaking.

*Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" And He said, "What have you done? **The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground.** (Genesis 4:8-10)*

That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. (Matthew 23:35)

If there is no problem recognising this use of language in a book full of historic events and relatively little use of figurative language and visions (Genesis), why is there a problem in recognising that the same is occurring in a book that is **full** of visions and figurative language (Revelation)? This seems to be a contradictory way of interpreting Revelation 6:9-11. If Abel's blood did not actually cry in Genesis then why do the dead saints of Revelation have to actually cry?

One does not have to label the fifth seal of Revelation as a 'spiritualisation' just because the described event does not transpire according to how the vision represented it. I believe that the event described is future, that God will signal that the deaths of martyrs will be avenged in "*a little while*", and that heavenly actions will be put into place to ensure that the faithful receive their reward. To say how this event will happen in actuality leads to speculation. But the vision is enough to ensure the reader that justice *will* be done.

5. The prevailing view removes the focus from the biblical teaching on resurrection

There are several passages to which I wish to refer that clarify the teaching of a future physical resurrection. The purpose for including such is not to suggest that the church would disagree with these interpretations (in most cases) but to contrast this lucidity with what the Bible has to say about going to Heaven.

John 5:20-29

For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent Him. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

Context: the Jewish response to Jesus healing on the Sabbath and calling God His Father was to seek to kill Him (vv16-18). Jesus' response to this was to point out that they would witness even greater signs of who He was (v20). It is after saying this that He spoke about raising the dead – which would seem a very strong indication that a raising of the dead was going to make these Jews “*marvel*” (v20).

Was this not demonstrated when He raised Lazarus (chapter 11)? Interestingly, within the above text, Jesus spoke about life coming to those who *hear His word*. The sign of Lazarus' resurrection is significant because Jesus *spoke* before Lazarus rose (11:43-44). This sign would demonstrate the reality of what Jesus could do for all who believe in Him.

The difficulty arises in interpreting Jesus' words in verses 24-25. When speaking about passing “*from death into life*” was He transferring the theme from the physical to the spiritual? The common interpretation has been to regard the context as

spiritual – particularly as there is a reference to the gift of everlasting life received as a result of faith, a gift that is said to be spiritual in nature.

Jesus' use of the present tense is used in support of this view: '*he who **hears** My words and **believes** in Him who sent Me **has** everlasting life*'. Presumably then this could not be about our future physical resurrection because, the moment one heard Jesus' words and believed in the God who sent Him, the life was received.

Though I have no appreciation for New Testament Greek verb constructs, when looking at Young's Literal Translation I am inclined to doubt this common interpretation of the text.

*Verily, verily, I say to you -- He who **is hearing** my word, and **is believing** Him who sent me, hath life age-during, and to judgment he doth not come, but hath passed out of the death to the life. (John 5:24. Young's Literal Translation)*

In most other English translations "*believes*" and "*hears*" could be understood as one-off actions from which one receives a permanent gift. However, the YLT and, more importantly, the Greek verbs suggest something more than a momentary hearing and believing. The words "*is hearing*" and "*is believing*" suggest **continuous** hearing and believing. In other words, if this is correct, one must continually hear the words of Jesus and live by faith in Him in order to possess this "*life*".

As I see it, the "*life*" cannot refer to spiritual life but instead a *guarantee* of physical resurrection in the future – that is, "*the resurrection of life*" as opposed to "*the resurrection of condemnation*". With all things considered I do not view this passage as making a distinction between those who are redeemed and those who aren't – rather it is the rewarding of the redeemed that is in view; the two outcomes are directed at them (after all, the audience is made up entirely of Jews: at the time God's redeemed people).

Though the gift of "*everlasting life*" is spoken of as a present possession, the experiencing of it seems to be set in the future and is of a physical nature. I think a strong clue to validating this interpretation is found when Jesus says,

*Most assuredly, I say to you, **the hour is coming**, and now is, when the dead **will hear** the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear [*'heard'* YLT] **will live**. (John 5:25)*

The majority of the quote is fixed to a future date when this '*hearing*' and '*living*' would be experienced. The exception is the part that says "*and now is*". I do not think we can interpret those three words as meaning that "*the hour*" had **come to**

stay at that point, otherwise there would have been no point in reverting back to the future tense. If the experience of 'hearing' and 'living' were here to stay, why was the future tense used at all by Jesus?

The only interpretation that makes sense to me is that Jesus was referring to "life" in the sense of physical resurrection. "*The hour is coming*" refers to His second coming – a time when He will resurrect His people. "*And now is*" referred to that time while He remained on earth, and was demonstrated in the physical resurrection of Lazarus. "*And now is*" was the time of giving the signs.

This understanding can then help provide a clearer context for what Jesus meant in the preceding verses where He spoke about *having* everlasting life and *passing* from death into life (present tense words). It all seems to be predicated upon a future physical event, so to spiritualise His words into present-day *fulfilment* is something of which I think we should be careful.

Because the Lord Jesus is now in Heaven we obviously don't have the opportunity today to witness Him physically resurrect the dead. We must wait until His return before He does such a thing again. But even while we remain alive we are allowed to possess that "life" – to have passed "*from death into life*". I would view this in the sense of possessing it *as our hope*. While I live faithfully I am attaining to that life. But I don't fully have it yet so I cannot truly 'lose' it.

If Jesus were not speaking about physical life and death in verses 24-25 there is no mistaking it in verses 28-29.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.

After this, He proceeded to speak about the reliability of His witness, so there is a definite change of focus. This, to me, warrants considering the above passage as one unit of thought, with 'life and death' (and the inherent judgment involved) the central focus. For Jesus to be speaking about *spiritual* life and death, but open and conclude the teaching with comments on *physical* life and death seems strange to me.

It is only a thought, but if Jesus is prophesying about 'life and death', if He is revealing important truth in few words, would it not make more sense for that 'life and death' to be of the same nature throughout the statement? Should it not either *all* be about spiritual 'life and death', or *all* about physical 'life and death'?

Though I find it perfectly understandable to interpret verses like these in a non-physical context, I don't see justification within the above text for doing so. Jesus spoke of passing "*from death into life*" and then, at the end of the statement, said that some of those "*who are in the graves*" will come forth to "*the resurrection of life*". It seems to be that the latter statement, explicitly physical in nature, defined what He meant by passing "*from death into life*". Furthermore, both are dependent upon hearing His voice (vv.24, 28).

I was reluctant to include this passage in my document because my discussion of it obviously opens doors to other unorthodox views, but I felt I had to do so in the end due to the unmistakable reference to physical resurrection (at least in verses 28-29).

This is the beginning of my referencing several passages that openly speak about our future physical resurrection. This must be contrasted with the biblical emphasis, or lack thereof, on going to Heaven prior to that resurrection.

John 6:35-58

*And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, **but should raise it up at the last day.** And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and **I will raise him up at the last day.**" The Jews then complained about Him, because He said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." And they said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven'?" Jesus therefore answered and said to them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; **and I will raise him up at the last day.** It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world." The Jews therefore quarrelled among themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, **and I will raise him up at the last day.** For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever."*

Within this passage the phrase "raise it/him up at the last day" occurs four times. I suspect there is significance in the word "life" (from "bread of life") when viewed alongside what will happen at the "last day". I am less sure of "life" referring to a

present-day ‘inner life’ than I am of the actual physically resurrected life that will exist in that day, and all that pertains to it. Though I agree that the “*life*” being spoken of is more than the process that allows a body to breathe (after all, there is a physical “*resurrection to life*” **and** a physical “*resurrection to condemnation*” (John 5:29); there is clearly a quality in the former that is not present in the latter – enough to designate the former as “*life*” in a unique sense) I am more inclined to understand the word’s usage by Jesus as eschatological and related to the physical body.

This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. (John 6:39)

The security of one who belongs to Christ is a highly important doctrine to God’s people, and yet here is one statement made by the Lord which tells us the event to which such people are secured – the resurrection at the last day. The “*will of the Father*” here does not express any non-physical future to which the believer is secured. Where is the passage that says something similar about God’s people going to Heaven?

And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:40)

Immediately following Jesus’ first reference to His followers being raised at the last day there follows another reference, made alongside the mention of “*everlasting life*”. I do not see any warrant for distinguishing the two benefits mentioned in this verse – there must be a clear link between the “*everlasting life*” and the resurrection at the last day. To me, the most obvious link is that this “*everlasting life*” is what the resurrected follower of Christ will receive at the last day. This is the life that will animate his dead body though its quality must be very different from those resurrected to “*condemnation*” (5:29), so we cannot simply be talking about ‘life that lasts forever’.

The literal translation of the Greek suggests that the definition of “*everlasting life*” specifically regards something that will be realised at “*the last day*”:

...and this is the will of Him who sent me, that every one who is beholding the Son, and is believing in him, may have life age-during, and I will raise him up in the last day. (John 6:40. Young’s Literal Translation)

ζωήν αἰώνιον (*zōēn aiōniōn*) is translated as “*life age-during*” in Young’s Literal Translation. I include it simply to illustrate that ‘*eternal*’ and ‘*everlasting*’ are not necessarily the best translations of *aiōniōn*. In fact, contrary even to Young’s translation, the word in and of itself does not signify a determined period of time – it

is the opposite. The word 'age', and what we each subjectively understand from that word, could easily mislead our interpretation of *aiōniōn*. The word neither limits the period of time nor determines it as everlasting. It is simply a life that is *aiōniōn* (or eonian should we wish to anglicise it). It is 'the life of the age'. The expression denotes a quality of life not the duration (John 17:3; 1st John 1:1-3).

Nevertheless, as I understand it, the context in which the expression *zōēn aiōniōn* is made seems to set it in the future. Though it is a life that is bestowed by God – the *eternal* One – and therefore must have God-given qualities which are unfamiliar to us as sinners, I think we are hiding from an inseparable link when we don't view *zōēn aiōniōn* in the same context as that which transpires at "*the last day*". Though this "*life*" has more to it than simple existence within an undetermined period of time, it will nonetheless only be experienced at that time.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:44)

Once again, the benefit of being 'drawn' to Christ by the Father is resurrection "*at the last day*". Am I wrong in saying that there is no biblical statement that is equally clear about going to Heaven when we die? This clarity is presented four times in one passage alone!

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:54)

I refer you back to what I had to say about verse 40 as this is yet another case of *zōēn aiōniōn* being linked to the resurrection at the last day.

My only further comment on verse 54 is that, even though the exact same Greek expression is used, there is a tendency for English translators to vary between using '*eternal*' and '*everlasting*' as the appropriate adjective. Is this a case of interpreting rather than translating? Was Aaron's priesthood eternal or everlasting (Numbers 25:13)?

John 11:1-44

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (John 11:1-4)

Because we know the outcome of this story we ought also to recognise what "*the glory of God*" is being equated to. Lazarus' sickness was not for the purpose of him dying and remaining dead but for, presumably, the opposite. Jesus then performed the sign that would bring about exactly that 'opposite' – physical resurrection. We have no difficulty in thinking of God's own Person or dwelling place as His "*glory*", but I have very rarely (if ever) thought of His raising the dead as being due that description also. And yet I am beginning to think that there are many more occurrences of "*glory*" in the Bible with that specific event in mind than we care to consider (the more obvious ones being, to name a small selection, Matthew 16:27; 24:30; 25:31; Mark 8:38; 10:37; 13:26; 9:26; 21:27; Romans 6:4; 8:18; 1st Corinthians 15:43; 1st Peter 1:7, 21; 4:13; 5:4).

In my discussion of John 5:20-29 I referred to Jesus speaking of a sign at which they would all "*marvel*" after which He proceeded to talk about the dead hearing His voice and passing from death to life. I believe there is a strong argument for saying that this resurrection of Lazarus is the exact sign of which He was speaking, and a visible demonstration of "*the glory of God*".

Not only this, but to see God's "*glory*" in the physical resurrection of His people further supports why Jesus, in chapter 5, said that a future time was coming, and "*now is*", when the dead would hear His voice and live. In chapter 11 such a "*glory*" is clearly expressed in a physical manner. The "*glory*" had come. It will come again, as Lazarus was only the sign.

We should not take lightly that the physical resurrection of God's people is described as "*the glory of God*". Why elevate another doctrine that we think is implied in Scripture (going to Heaven when we die) when that which is *clearly* expressed gets such a title?

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. Then after this

He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up." Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well." However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him." Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. (John 11:5-17)

It is noteworthy that, when discussing Lazarus' state, no reference is made to any other conscious experience he may be having. Far from this being an 'argument from silence' on my part, I believe that the rest of the text clearly portrays an atmosphere of hopelessness in the present. Jesus is not the only one who knows of a future resurrection here, and yet everyone's reaction to the present is solemn – including Jesus'. Why is the Lord not said to be exuding a joy, why does He later weep, if He knows that Lazarus will be raised that very day? Is He not appreciative of the reality of what death is – and particularly so when it is the death of a loved one?

Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother. Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." (John 11:18-24)

There seemed to be no surprise when Martha heard that her brother would rise again. Because she was not expecting his resurrection to be immediate her natural response was to think that Jesus meant the "resurrection at the last day". Such a statement illustrates the hope of the Jews. When set against the silence of what Lazarus was 'experiencing' at that moment, I find it telling that Martha's only comfort was in something that would happen in the future. Her reply suggests that

the biblical hope of an ‘afterlife’ is first dependent upon physical resurrection, and that this only occurs “*at the last day*”. There is no chastisement of Martha for saying this, no correction for omitting that Lazarus was ‘safe in the presence of God’.

In fact, her response to what Jesus said next illustrates the insight she had into spiritual truth and therefore how seriously we should consider the truths in which she placed her faith: “*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is come into the world*” (v.27).

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26)

These verses always seemed self-contradictory to me. “*Though he may die, he shall live*” fits the context of physical resurrection and satisfactorily describes this biblical doctrine. “*And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die*”, however, suggests that the one who “*may die*” won’t! The latter statement does not make sense within a physical context, which is perhaps why ‘soul immortality’ is read into it. But doesn’t ‘soul immortality’ exist for all, whether believer or unbeliever?

By referencing Young’s Literal Translation and finding a Greek version of John 11 online (with English translation) it is evident that the translators of most English versions omitted some words from verse 26.

*and every one who is living and believing in me shall not die -- **to the age***
(Young’s Literal Translation)

To which “*age*” is Jesus referring and why were these words (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα / *eis ton aióna*) left out? There is surely a big difference between saying that someone who is living and believing in Christ “*shall never die*” and that someone who is living and believing in Christ “*shall not die **to the age***”. If “*the age*” refers to a time yet future then the entire verse can once again be understood within a physical context. We all die in this age, but in the coming age the faithful in Christ will not die *then*. Given that Martha’s previous statement regarded “*the resurrection at the last day*” (v24) I find it reasonable that this “*age*” – omitted by our translators – is crucial to our understanding of verse 26.

It is here, in the context of physical resurrection, that immortality becomes a theme. Though I cannot find references to a present-day indwelling ‘immortal soul’ in the Bible, I can see a reference to immortality in the light of the physical resurrection of

the faithful. It is only here that we can start to develop an understanding of immortality.

The rest of the account contains elements of what I have already discussed (“*the glory of God*” in physical resurrection; the hopeless language used by those who mourned for Lazarus, including the mourning of the One who would resurrect Him; the parallels with Jesus’ words in John 5:20-29):

*She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, “The Teacher has come and is calling for you.” As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, “She is going to the tomb to weep there.” Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, **He groaned in the spirit and was troubled**. And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” **Jesus wept**. Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him!” And some of them said, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?” Then **Jesus, again groaning in Himself**, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that **if you would believe you would see the glory of God?**” Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.” Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.”*

1st Corinthians 15

Because this chapter is already well known for its defence and explanation of the future physical resurrection of God's people it is probably unnecessary to quote it in its entirety. It is also very long, so I will only discuss some parts.

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1st Corinthians 15:1-4)

What is “*the gospel*” according to Paul in this chapter? I have heard the above verses interpreted as a summary of “*the gospel*” that we should be sharing with the world: Christ died for them, was buried and rose again. Taking this set of verses as one unit of thought I can understand why it is interpreted in such a way but I do not agree. Paul does not change the subject after verse 4. How can we be dogmatic that Paul ceased to define “*the gospel*” in verse 5? There is a clear continuation in his definition of the good news:

*...**and that** He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. **After that** He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. **After that** He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. **Then last of all** He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. (1st Corinthians 15:5-8)*

If Paul was defining the ‘gospel’ that we should be sharing with the world then we should also be telling them about the chronological order of people who saw the resurrected Christ. But I do not see any of this chapter as Paul giving us information for ‘world evangelism’. Paul is declaring “*the gospel*” to the Corinthian church (v.1), “*those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus*” and “*called to be saints*” (1:2). This “*gospel*” was good news ***for saints***, so, instead of us using these verses as tools for speaking to those outside the church, ought we not to be contemplating them ourselves? If so, we therefore need to contemplate all the details that Paul was about to share. The subject was not ‘how to become a Christian’ but ‘the reality of our future physical resurrection’.

Christ died and was buried (vv.3-4). I must briefly digress because this phenomenal truth of the Son of God's sacrifice cannot be compromised. All in the church would

agree on this. But the discussion in the previous section, where I argued that death had to mean death in every sense, is very relevant indeed to the Cross. Did Jesus *really* die? Did His soul/spirit live on? If so, it could surely be argued that He did not *really* die. That ought to cause great trouble to our understanding of what God has said. Not only would He have failed to carry out the warning of death to Adam but any continued existence of the Son of God's 'true self' (i.e. His 'soul') would make a half-truth of His death, and consequently we are still in our sins (v17).

His death (total death) and burial had to happen in order for physical resurrection to occur. The good news – ***our 'gospel'*** – is that this is a process through which the believer will pass. But the saint's passing out of death and into life is only possible because Christ died "*for our sins*". His sacrificial death has made it possible for Him to act as my heavenly High Priest, making it possible for me to attain to that resurrection that Paul sought (Philippians 3:11).

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? (1st Corinthians 15:12)

Some of God's people were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead – presumably this is what prompted Paul to write this part of the epistle. Note that Paul does not accuse those outside the church of sharing this false doctrine, but those within. I find this interesting because there is an extract from a 2nd century correspondence between Justin Martyr and Trypho which shows that resurrection-denial was linked to belief in going to Heaven:

For I choose to follow not men or men's doctrines, but God and the doctrines [delivered] by Him. For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this [truth regarding resurrection] and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians (Justin Martyr. Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 80, ca. 150 A.D.)

I do not include this quote as if it should be accepted with the same reverence as biblical evidence, nor as an effort to label today's prevailing belief about Heaven as 'blasphemy'; but I quote it as I believe it warrants serious consideration. A warning in an historical document written by a famous early church father showed there to be a link between belief in the soul going to Heaven and denial of the resurrection of the dead.

I do not know if the Corinthian saints who were denying the resurrection were also saying that the soul went to Heaven at death. If they were, perhaps this served as a precursor to the doctrine that was popular at the time of Justin Martyr. But Paul makes no mention of it. He neither attacks nor defends the doctrine.

However, by not mentioning the doctrine in a chapter containing newly revealed details of what happens at the resurrection, Paul would be omitting how we, as partakers of a continuous conscious state, leave our home in Heaven to be reunited with a physical experience. In other words, I am suggesting that if the doctrine of 'going to Heaven when we die' were true it should have been included in 1st Corinthians 15.

Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished [ἀπώλοντο (apōlonto)]. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. (1st Corinthians 15:15-19)

I think that these five verses raise questions that challenge both views: the doctrine I am challenging and the one I am defending. The question I would direct against the accepted doctrine is this: how is any human being dependent upon Christ's resurrection for continued existence? If the soul exists in an immortal state, and this was the way it was created, then Christ's resurrection was surely unnecessary – at least in the sense of preserving the soul from perishing.

In fact, if the soul exists in an immortal state then verse 19 is undermined. We are **not** "of all men the most pitiable" if the dead do not rise, for we share in a blissful conscious state of soul/spirit existence in Heaven. Unfortunate as it may be that the dead do not rise, we nonetheless are certainly not in a "pitiable" condition in the presence of God.

I would venture to guess that the doctrine of an immortal soul was therefore introduced at some point to undermine the victory achieved by Jesus Christ on the third day. 'Perished' ceases to mean 'perished'. Death ceases to mean death. Irrespective of what Christ's resurrection obtained for His people they could have still existed in some sense without it. How then would they have 'perished'?

The intransitive verb "perished" (apōlonto) in 1 Corinthians 15:18 is in the middle voice. The middle voice signifies that those who "have fallen asleep in Christ" are in

a ruin or a resultant destructive state; that is, they are dead. The verb was used twice previously in 1 Corinthians 10:9, 10 pertaining to many of the Israelites in the wilderness who were killed either by “*the serpents*” or by “*the destroyer*”. Therefore, Paul’s argument in context concerning the importance of the resurrection becomes all too clear. Unless the dead are resurrected, including Jesus, then there is only one other possibility: they “*have perished*”. Paul does not hint at any other options.

The question that can be directed towards my viewpoint is this: if Christ’s resurrection has removed the prospect of His people being utterly destroyed, then why does my viewpoint continue to describe the dead saint as being in a state of non-existence (which some could understandably describe as ‘utter destruction’)? Paul’s clear intent in verse 18 is to say that ‘*those who have fallen asleep in Christ*’ have *not* perished – precisely because Jesus Christ *did* rise from the dead. How then can I argue that a dead saint ceases to exist until the resurrection at the last day?

I believe that this question is answered in the verses that follow:

*If **in this life only** we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have **fallen asleep**. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ **all shall be made alive**. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. (1st Corinthians 15:19-23)*

First of all, Paul spoke of a life that was to come – the saint does not have hope “*in this life only*”. When is that life? In the context, it is at the resurrection of those who are Christ’s (v23). Physical death came through Adam; physical resurrection comes through Jesus Christ.

But what about the interim? Christ’s people, remember, cannot be spoken of as “*perished*” so does this mean they continue to exist in some form? I believe that the answer is found in Paul’s linguistic illustration of the hope in a saint’s death: they have “*fallen asleep*”. From the account of Lazarus’ resurrection, among others, we know that “*sleep*” is a euphemism for death. As such, I would therefore argue that the dead believer is not “*perished*” even though quite possibly he/she is nothing more than dust. This is because the physical body that has returned to dust will one day ‘awake’ again – just as the buried seed will one day realise existence once again in a better sense than before (vv35-38). Death, for the meantime, remains death, but ***it is not permanent***. This is how a dead believer can be referred to as both dead and yet not utterly destroyed. In the above portion of the chapter it is evident that the “*life*” Paul uses in contrast to “*perishing*” is not realised immediately at the point of physical death, but ***at Christ’s coming*** (v.23).

The next portion brings us back to an earlier discussion of the ‘soul’:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being.” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. (1st Corinthians 15:42-45)

Verse 45 references Genesis 2:7, where Adam (in the Hebrew) ‘became’ a living NEPHESH (soul). Unsurprisingly, the Greek word that is used is ψυχήν (*psuchēn*) – soul – and once again the verb is ‘became’ (ἐγένετο / *egeneto* – ‘came into being/happened/became’). There can be no mistaking then that the Bible portrays Adam as *being* rather than *having* a soul.

Not only that, but here is another occurrence where the “life” that Jesus Christ gives is set in the context of physical resurrection. He “became a life-giving spirit”. When “life” is so often used in this context, I assume that the physical resurrection to come (that is, the “resurrection to life” as opposed to the “resurrection to condemnation”) is something that the saint should primarily focus upon when considering the gift of God (Romans 6:23). How can the ‘hope of Heaven’ do anything but relegate this truth in importance?

Philippians 3:7-21

But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind. Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

The crucial part of this text has already been discussed earlier in this document. Paul's motivation for rejecting his Pharisaical tradition and serving Christ was that he may "attain to the resurrection from the dead". His not attaining to the resurrection to life is, I believe, also referred to in 1st Corinthians 9:27:

But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

This striving of Paul's for a goal not yet gained is a far cry from the hope of Heaven that is today presented as certain to all of the people of God. Here in Philippians 3 Paul emphasised that he had not yet been sufficiently perfected to have attained to this resurrection, which should prompt us to question the nature of this resurrection

and who will take part in it (will it be *all* of the redeemed?). This resurrection was also clearly a desire that God's Son had for His people – or at least for Paul (“*that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me*”). Following this passage closely it seems clear to me that, once Paul mentions this resurrection, it becomes his sole focus – he *must* attain to it.

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (vv.13-14)

Following Paul's train of thought back from these verses “*the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” is the “*resurrection from the dead*”.

In encouraging the Philippian saints to do the same, Paul does say that “*our citizenship is in heaven*”. But he does not state Heaven as our destination. I believe that our citizenship is presently there because of *who* resides there at the right hand of God. It is “*from*” Heaven that we await our Saviour (He is returning, we are not ‘going’) for a purpose that is evidently related to our bodies and how they will be.

...who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (v21)

If we were in Heaven from the point of death, why would we be *waiting* for God's Son? We would already be with Him. Why would we long for anything? And if Paul were speaking from the perspective of one who had not yet died (which he obviously *was* doing) why could he not foresee a problem with the doctrine of physical resurrection? Why could he not foresee that once his soul had ascended to Heaven there would be no more need to long for anything? In other words, the resurrection from the dead is a needless goal if happiness and peace is realised the moment our ‘immortal soul’ enters Heaven.

Matthew 22:23-33 & Luke 20:27-38

*The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, saying: "Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her." Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching. **(Matthew 22:23-33)***

*Then some of the Sadducees, who deny that there is a resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, saying: "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife, and he dies without children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. And the first took a wife, and died without children. And the second took her as wife, and he died childless. Then the third took her, and in like manner the seven also; and they left no children, and died. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife does she become? For all seven had her as wife." Jesus answered and said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But even Moses showed in the burning bush passage that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him." **(Luke 20:27-38)***

These texts are included to once again show a clear biblical teaching on a future resurrection of God's people. Everything that Jesus says in these two texts is within the framework of "the resurrection".

As with Paul in Philippians, it is only those "who are counted worthy" who may participate in the resurrection in mind, and I would view this criterion as minimising

the focus from the general resurrection of God's people to one key aspect of it: the "*resurrection to life*" of John 5. It is within the certainty of there being a resurrection of the redeemed that we are informed of two possible outcomes: resurrection to life or resurrection to condemnation (Daniel 12:2; John 5:29; Acts 24:15). As I understand it, these are ***not*** two outcomes that are intended to encompass all humanity ('Christian' and 'non-Christian') but rather a judgement of God's people alone, separate from the judgement of the rest of the world.

It is beyond the scope of this document to articulate and defend this view of the resurrection but I feel it is important to state that, just because one is redeemed, it does not suffice that one should enter and reign in the coming Kingdom with Christ – only a ***life*** of faith guarantees such (picking up our cross and following Him, striving to enter at the narrow gate, presenting our bodies as living sacrifices, etc.) Anything else is sufficient only for the resurrection with a negative outcome. In the texts above it would seem that Jesus' attention is upon the "*resurrection to life*" – the resurrection to which we should all be striving to attain.

The Jews were clearly familiar with the idea of a general resurrection of God's people, informed perhaps by texts such as Daniel 12:1-3, Ezekiel 37, Job 19:25-27 (to name the ones that immediately spring to my mind). There is no question of the existence/nonexistence of marriage in Heaven, only "*in the resurrection*".

Matthew 27:51-54

Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many. So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

What was the purpose of the saints being raised from the graves? Without wishing to intimate that I really understand this event, could it not at least be recognised that the hope of these saints depended upon the death of the Son of God at Calvary – and that this hope was **resurrection**? Interesting that we have a clear biblical example of resurrection resulting from Christ's work, but we are merely told that Bible **infers** the dead ascended to Heaven from *Abraham's Bosom* after Jesus' Resurrection.

Jesus Christ had finished the work by which He could intercede as High Priest for a people who would be resurrected, just as He Himself was going to be resurrected. The rising from the grave of these saints would therefore have been a sign of the magnificent achievement of Calvary, an achievement that will be witnessed in a far greater way when He returns.

And where were these saints prior to this event? There is no mention of them descending in soul from Heaven, or ascending from *Abraham's Bosom*. All we are told about is physical resurrection. They were dead and are now alive. Are we meant to read 'under the surface' and suppose that the immortal souls of these saints had re-entered their bodies?

Taking the text at face value I would assume that the destiny of these saints after their initial death was the place from where they were raised: the grave.

Acts 23:6; 24:14-16

But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” (Acts 23:6)

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. (Acts 24:14-16)

In both Paul's defence before the Sanhedrin and before Felix he made mention of the resurrection of the dead. He made no mention of going to Heaven. In the first defence Paul famously used this doctrine to divide the opinions of Pharisees and Sadducees, yet it was still an honest appraisal of his faith. He was preaching Jesus as the Messiah – a message rejected by both religious groups – and yet the truth was that “*the hope and resurrection of the dead*”, which was believed by the Pharisees, was personified in this Man. He is not the hope of the ‘immortal’ but the hope of those who are *dead*, that hope being fulfilled in the resurrection.

Hebrews 6:1-3

*Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, **of resurrection of the dead**, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.*

From where does the church define 'the fundamentals of the faith'? What are the basics? If the above verses are anything to go by, we have made some serious errors in judgment. If we are to create a statement of faith by which we accept some as brothers and sisters, but reject others as heretics, is this not a good place to start?

Where is the doctrine of going to Heaven when we die? Is it a teaching that belongs to the 'meat' of Hebrews 5:12-15 instead? If so, why is the doctrine taught today to children and those who are not redeemed? Why is one treated suspiciously for denying such a doctrine if it is not among the listed fundamentals above and can only be understood by the mature?

The "*resurrection of the dead*" is listed as a fundamental. The immortal soul's ascension to Heaven is not.

Conclusion

Having spent some time putting these thoughts together, and as much time re-reading them, I am aware that I must stop at some point (perhaps 60 pages earlier!).

The reason I have written so much is to try to defend my views from as many angles as possible – to show that, whether right or wrong, they are based upon long, drawn-out ‘wrestlings’ with the Scriptures.

I will find it hard enough to have my views discarded and corrected, but if this is done so through the Bible, then it will be fair and proper to do so. But to be caricatured as cultish, or treated suspiciously for saying what is not normally said within the church, would be unprofitable for the discussion and unedifying. The Bible is the focus. If my views are unbiblical then that is enough – I will be wrong and will have been ‘put in my place’. There will therefore be no need to tar me with the same brush as those who openly espouse the ‘inspired’ words of extra-biblical sources.

Surely I have presented enough reasons for it to be said that I ask fair questions. If so, I would ask you to be cautious about using the word ‘heresy’. If my theological leanings do seem heretical to you, then please bear in mind the sincerity with which they are presented and accept that I do genuinely wish to understand God’s Word alone. To be labelled a ‘heretic’ would therefore be, I believe, unfair and unhelpful to all involved.

That said, despite genuine effort, I am sure there are many occasions in this document where I am too dogmatic of my own views and condescending of your views. It will not have been my intention, but I am aware that inserting some cherished doctrines into inverted commas (thereby emphasising that I do not reckon them to be true) could come across as very personal and insulting. Please understand that I have tried to think of ways to distance myself from doctrines I no longer believe without insulting you, but I can’t help but think that I will look back on this document and find so many better ways to word things.

However, I must ‘move on’ and air these views, defending them to the best of my ability *now*. The value we place on these doctrines, and disagreements we may have, will always lead to a feeling that *we* are being attacked along with the doctrine. I understand this, and just hope that I can react with the same respect with which I trust this document will be treated.

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