

God, Man, and Immortality

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines "immortal" as "exempt from death or oblivion" and "immortality" as "unending existence." Vine's Greek Dictionary defines *athanasia* (immortal/immortality) as "deathlessness or everlastingness." Biblical synonyms are "eternal life," "everlasting life," and "endless life."

As can be perceived here, there are actually two dimensions (if you will) for the meaning of immortality: Some speak of it in the fountain-of-youth sense, meaning that they're hoping for or working toward a solution for man to become exempt from physical death, while most others speak of immortality in the after-life sense, meaning that they're hoping for or working toward living endlessly following their biological demise, this latter idea obviously being our topic from a religious, biblical, and everlasting spiritual perspective; i.e., *this* study of immortality concerns our desire to be exempt from oblivion and therefore to continue on after physical death.

Who can deny that man wasn't only created with an innate sense of *physical* self-preservation, but also (apparently unlike animals) with an innate sense of *spiritual* self-preservation? Thousands of books and movies have been recorded based on the desire of living on after biological death. Surely there's no denying this. However...

Religiously speaking, there are two primary sides to the immortality issue: There are those who hold to "UI" or **U**nconditional **I**mmortality (which means that every human being is immortal from conception), and there are those who hold to "CI" or **C**onditional **I**mmortality (which means that every human being has the *potential* for immortality).

I predict that all those reading this have been raised to believe in UI, which means we've all been taught that God expects us to make a choice in this life concerning the eternal destiny of our immortal selves, either with or without our Creator. However...

In my own personal studies over recent years, I've rather come to believe that the traditional idea of UI isn't actually what the Bible conveys to us, obviously meaning that now I'm leaning **very** heavily toward the more modernly UNtraditional idea of CI. I say "modernly" untraditional because of what I'm going to share with you now before we get into the Scriptures themselves.

A Dr. John H. Roller did an in-depth study of the earliest "church fathers" and arrived at the following conclusion: "It is clear," he wrote, "that conditionalism [i.e. Conditional or 'Choice' Immortality] was the original doctrine of the early church, and that naturalism [Unconditional 'No Choice' Immortality] was first introduced by Athenagoras of Athens [ca. AD 175] and popularized by Tertullian of Carthage [ca. AD 200], after whose time it rapidly became the predominant view, though there continued to be an outspoken minority of conditionalists." (The earliest "church father" is Clement of Rome [AD 30-70] who, by the way, is believed to have been a companion of the apostle Paul himself.)

Justin Martyr who lived/wrote in the early 100s was an explicit conditionalist: "Now the soul partakes of life, since God wills it to live. Thus, then, it will not partake [of life] when God does not will it to live. For to live is not its attribute, as it is God's.... Whenever the soul must cease to exist, the spirit of life is removed from it, and there is no more soul, but it goes back to the place from whence it was taken" (*Dialogue*, Chap. 6).

Irenaeus, who wrote in the late 100s, was also an explicit conditionalist: "It is the Father of all who imparts continuance [of existence] forever and ever on those who are saved. For life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature, but it is bestowed according to the grace [or 'gift'] of God" (*Against Heresies*, 2:34:3). So...

Scripturally speaking, what might be the reasons for conditional immortality to have been the original belief of the early church?

There are two Greek terms translated six times as "immortal" or "immortality" in the NKJV: *athanasia* (quantity in nature) & *aphtharsia* (quality in nature).

Athanasia is merely *thanatos* (which means "death") with the negative prefix "alpha," meaning that it refers to a state of "death-LESS-ness."

Aphtharsia (obviously employed as a synonym by Paul for *athanasia*) refers to the state of incorruptibility, a synonym for "immortal" on thesaurus.com.

Interestingly, you won't find the English words "immortal," "immortality," "incorruptible," or "incorruption" anywhere in the NKJV of the entire OT, but you can find those terms from *athanasia* or *aphtharsia* 18 times in the NKJ NT. So...

Let's briefly consider those 18 passages.

In Romans 1:23a Paul wrote of certain men as changing "the glory of the incorruptible [*aphthartos*] God into an image made like corruptible man."

In Romans 2:7 Paul wrote of "eternal life" as going "to those who ... seek for glory, honor, and immortality [fr. *aphtharsia*, better as 'incorruptibility']."

In First Corinthians 9:25b Paul wrote about how he ran the race "to obtain ... an imperishable [*aphthartos*] crown."

In First Corinthians 15:42 Paul wrote that "The body is being sown in corruption, [while] it's being raised in incorruption [*aphtharsia*]."

In First Corinthians 15:50 Paul wrote that "corruption is not inheriting incorruption [*aphtharsia*]."

In First Corinthians 15:52 Paul wrote that "the dead ones will be raised incorruptible [*aphthartos*]."

In First Corinthians 15:53 Paul wrote that "this corruptible must put on incorruption [*aphtharsia*], and this mortal must put on immortality [*athanasia*]."

In First Corinthians 15:54 Paul wrote of when "this corruptible has put on incorruption [*aphtharsia*] and [when] this mortal has put on immortality [*athanasia*]."

In Ephesians 6:24 Paul wrote of loving the Lord "in sincerity [*aphtharsia*]."

In First Timothy 1:17 Paul wrote that God is "immortal [*aphthartos*, better as 'incorruptible']."

In First Timothy 6:16 Paul wrote that God "alone has immortality [*athanasia*]."

In Second Timothy 1:10 Paul wrote about how Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality [*aphtharsia*, 'incorruptibility'] to light thru the Gospel."

In Titus 2:7 Paul wrote concerning teaching the young men about how they're to demonstrate "integrity, reverence, [and] incorruptibility [*aphtharsia*]."

In First Peter 1:3-4a Peter wrote about how his audience-members were "begotten ... to an incorruptible [*aphthartos*] inheritance."

In First Peter 1:23 Peter wrote about how they were "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible [*aphthartos*]." And...

In First Peter 3:4 Peter wrote that Christian women were to adorn themselves with "the incorruptible [*aphthartos*] ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit."

The question now, of course, is "What can we learn from these passages?"

Firstly, four of these passages, viz. Ephesians 6:24, Titus 2:7, First Peter 1:23, and 3:4 aren't relevant to our study.

Secondly, concerning God, we learn from Romans 1:23 and First Timothy 1:17 that God is *aphthartos* or incorruptible, which appears to take on two different meanings:

In Romans 1:23 it likely means that God cannot be or become corrupt in a sinful sense; i.e., just as He cannot lie (Titus 1:2), He cannot corrupt Himself nor can anyone cause Him to become corrupt or sinful (sinful being a synonym for that which is corrupt [James 1:13]). In this sense, God is sinless. But...

In First Timothy 1:17 it likely means that, as a spirit (John 4:24) which/who has existed since eternity past and will exist into eternity future, God doesn't and can't corrupt; i.e., He can't be destroyed and doesn't rot, ruin, spoil, get old, or waste away like we can and do.

Thirdly, concerning God again, we learn from First Timothy 6:16 that **only** God possesses immortality. Now, *exactly* what all Paul meant to be involved in this statement, I'm not sure. For examples...

Did Paul say this with merely a contrast between God and man in mind? I.e., did this declaration apply only *at the time he wrote* because (per 1 Cor. 15:50ff) "immortality" hadn't been meted out yet at AD 70 to mankind? And I say "at the time he wrote" because (if they exist[ed] in the *traditional* sense) didn't/don't angels also possess immortality? And this in turn brings up another question:

By "immortality" did Paul perhaps mean that only God possessed it in the ultimate sense, i.e. in the impossibility-to-become-extinct sense, meaning that His life can't be extinguished by anything or anyone, including Himself? See, it would seem to me that if God has the ability to endow human beings with immortality, then wouldn't He also have the ability to reclaim that gift? If not, and since living Christians per First Corinthians 15:50ff were granted immortality, then wouldn't that imply that the eternal security doctrine is true? Well...

Deuteronomy 29:29 about the secret things which belong to God really starts pressing on me at times like this; so I think I'm going to have to leave this verse with questions for now, and move on. Oh, but at least one thing is clear:

**Without being directly connected to God, we cannot possess immortality!*

Fourthly, we learn from Second Timothy 1:10 that, thru the completed Gospel work of Jesus, immortality (i.e. reconnection to our immortal Creator) was brought to light.

What does it mean to bring something "to light"? Well, although it may be obvious, let's consider it for a moment anyway: Firstly, this Greek term (*photizo*) is related to *phosphorus*, something that gives off light; secondly, *photizo* is found in numerous other places in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, which help to paint a clearer picture for us about its meaning here.

In Ephesians 1:17-18 Paul told the Ephesians about a prayer of his for them: May "God ... give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation..., the eyes of your understanding being enlightened." Now notice some similar Old Testament passages in which *photizo* is found:

In Psalm 19:8b we read that "the commandments of the Lord are pure, enlightening the eyes." And, interestingly...

In Ezra 2:63 and Nehemiah 7:65 it's translated as "Urim" in the "Urim and Thummin" phrase that, due to the Mormons, we've heard about from time to time. "Urim" in Hebrew literally means "lights," but metaphorically to the Jews it referred to "revelation," just as Paul used it in Ephesians 1. ("Thummin," on the other hand, means "perfections," but referred to "truth.") So "Urim & Thummin" means "revelation & truth" or the revelation or manifestation of the truth, that which was symbolized by jewels on the High Priest's breastplate. Anyway, moving on...

In Second Kings 12:2 & 17:27-28 this term is rendered "instruct" and "teach."

In Judges 13:3 it's translated as "shown." And my favorite for us today,...

In Psalm 119:130 we find these words of praise to God: "The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." So...

What all does this mean relative to Second Timothy 1 about how Jesus brought immortality to light? Well, it means that mankind has been enlightened (i.e. provided with *information*) through Jesus—the Word, who has shown or revealed how to obtain immortality or eternal life (that which can only be obtained from God), implying that man did NOT have it! And this leads us to the rest of the passages:

Fifthly, since man didn't already have immortality or the knowledge and ability concerning how to obtain it, and since Jesus manifested it via the Gospel, Paul could say in Romans 2:7 and First Corinthians 9:25 that immortality would be granted to those who looked for it, not to those who looked for more of a temporal or materialistic reward of sorts, e.g. a physical kingdom &/or freedom from Roman rule.

Sixthly, we learn from First Peter 1:3-4 (as well as indirectly from 1 Cor. 15:50) that immortality is (or is at least included in) the fulfillment of the prophesied/promised inheritance of God's New Covenant people. How's that? Well, first off...

There were Jews during the first century who seemed to understand the inheritance to be "eternal life" or immortality via reconciliation to God: According to Luke 10:25 & 18:18 a lawyer and a rich youth both asked Jesus how they could "inherit eternal life." Now...

It's possible that the lawyer, who was merely testing Jesus, heard Him speak of inheriting eternal life (for we know He did speak of such things [cf. Mat. 19:29]), thus he was being a smart-aleck; but I don't see that as a possibility with the young man who was portrayed as being honest. But you know...

I did consider whether such Jews as these weren't thinking of eternal life the same way we do today; i.e., maybe it was another Hebrew idiom that referred to the blessings of being part of the Messianic kingdom, which we know they thought of in a physical sense. And, if so, then perhaps the idea to them was that in the Messiah's kingdom they'd *forever live* free from bondage to anyone ever again. But, although I could see some logic in that, the problem is that the idea of eternal life being associated with inheritance is found in the Old Covenant Scriptures, which takes me on to Daniel:

In Daniel 12:2, Daniel was given the promise/prophecy that, at the time of the end of his people Israel, there'd be those who'd awaken to "everlasting life"; then in verse 13 he was assured that he'd be one of them: "Go your way till the end, for you shall rest and then arise to your inheritance at the end of the days." (Obviously, since Daniel would be dead at the time of the end, immortality for him wasn't related to physical Israel's existence without being in bondage.)

In Hebrews 9:15, Paul said something related to this part of our study: After speaking of redemption (which is what Daniel 12 is about), he said "that those who are called receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." Likewise...

In Matthew 19, after getting into it with the rich young ruler and even His own disciples, Jesus, after mentioning the time of "the regeneration" (or the time of redemption) in verse 28, said in verse 29, "Everyone who has left [this, that, or the other] for My name's sake, shall ... inherit everlasting life." Now...

Even if someone thinks that the Daniel 12 reference is to sketchy, surely no one can/will deny that the inheritance definitely was about the kingdom of God, which is linked by Jesus to "everlasting life." Here's what I mean:

In Isaiah 57:13, God prophesied that "he who puts his trust in Me ... shall inherit My holy mountain."

In Joel 2:1, 3:17, and Zechariah 8:3 we learn that the holy mountain is equal to Mt. Zion or Jerusalem. Then...

In Hebrews 12 we learn that the New Covenant Mt. Zion of prophecy is equal to what Paul called "Heavenly [or Spiritual] Jerusalem" in verse 22 which he then in turn equated to "the kingdom" in verse 28. (By the way, this same apostle, in 1 Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50, & Gal. 5:21, wrote of inheriting the kingdom of God.) Now with all that as background, notice...

In Matthew 25:34, we find Jesus saying to the righteous in the judgment, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you," after which He went on to say in verse 46 that they'd "go ... into eternal life." Thus inheriting the kingdom was/is equivalent to inheriting immortality, or as Paul termed it in Hebrews 1:14, "inheriting salvation." [Read Rev. 21:1-7 which puts all this together in one neat little package.]

Speaking of the kingdom, especially as regards its change from old physical Jerusalem to new heavenly Jerusalem, we now come to the last four passages which employ the Greek immortality-terms *athanasia* and *aphtharsia*. So...

Seventhly and Lastly, we learn from First Corinthians 15:42, 50, & 52-54 that that old corporate body of *death* had to be sown, die, and then be raised as a new corporate body—a body (which came into possession) of *life*.

According to verse 42, that body comprised of dead ones was sown in *phthora* (or corruption), then it was raised in *aphtharsia* or incorruption.

According to verse 50, that fleshly, corruptible body couldn't inherit the kingdom of God; i.e., it (obviously along with its members) had to be changed.

According to verse 52, that resurrection to *aphtharsia* or incorruption occurred at the sounding of the last (or seventh) trumpet (cf. Mat. 24:31 & Rev. 10:7).

According to verse 53, that's when *phthartos* or corruption was swallowed up by *aphtharsia* or incorruption, and *thnetos* or mortality was swallowed up by *athanasia* or immortality. Then...

According to verse 54 (as well as v. 55), we learn that the events of verse 53 had to occur in order for the last enemy—death—to be finally rendered totally impotent (v. 26), thereby fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14. So...

In Conclusion:

I know this study fails in answering every question, even every question of my own, but it wasn't designed to even attempt that difficult task. Rather what I mainly wanted to do in this study was to merely consider all the verses with the Greek terms for "immortality" to learn what we can concerning not only a little about how the Bible employs the terminology, but also to consider it in light of the timing of its fulfillment in regards to its connection to the inheritance and our immortal God.

Mortality and Immortality are all about Death and Life: If we refuse Christ's forgiveness of our sins, then we'll remain in sin-death—separation from God's fellowship here and hereafter; but if we accept Christ's forgiveness of our sins, then we'll be gifted with life (immortal reconciliation) here and hereafter. It doesn't seem to me to matter all that much whether we completely understand all the ins-&-outs of what we call "the after-life," as long as we concede that in Christ is the promise / fulfillment of immortality ... eternal, everlasting, perpetual, endless life (Heb. 7:16) or fellowship with our spirit Creator, for if He lives outside the physical world as a spirit (John 4:24), so can we.

[Immortality A Gift: John 3:16 & 6:51. Life After Death: Psa. 17:15, Heb. 11:10, 13, 15-16, 35, 1 Cor. 15:16-18, Mat. 22:31-32, John 11:25-26, Rom. 6:4-5, 8-11, 8:38-39, Php. 1:21-23, & Rev. 14:13.]

[Tony E. Denton, 8/10; slightly revised 3/17.]