

Proof of a Separate State of Souls Between Death and the Resurrection

Part II

Isaac Watts

Founder of English hymnody, he was born at Southampton, England on July 17, 1674 and died at Stoke Newington, November 25, 1748. He obtained an excellent education at Southampton grammar school, then joining the dissenters, he studied at an academy at Stoke Newington, where he acquired his accuracy of thought and habit of laborious analysis; leaving the academy in 1694, he spent two years at home, beginning his hymn writing.

He was a private tutor, 1695-1701; became assistant pastor in the chapel at Mark Lane, 1699, and sole pastor in 1702. Because of frequent attacks of illness, Samuel Price had assisted him from 1703 and was chosen co-pastor 1713. His illness increased with time, but the congregation refused to part with one who had become so famous and beloved.

SECTION II

Probable Arguments for the Separate State

THERE ARE SEVERAL REFERENCES in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, which may be most naturally and properly construed to signify the existence of the soul in a separate state after the body is dead. But since they do not carry with them such plain evidence, or forcible proof, and may possibly be interpreted to another sense, I shall not long insist upon them; however, it may not be amiss just to mention a few of them.

Psalm 73:24, 26: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory: my flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." In these verses *receiving to glory* seems immediately to follow a *guidance* through this world. When the flesh and heart of the Psalmist should fail him in death, God continued to be his portion forever, God would receive him to Himself as such a portion, and thereby He gave strength or courage to his heart even in a dying hour. It would be a very odd and unnatural exposition of this text to interpret it only of the

resurrection, thus: "Thou shalt guide me by thy counsel through this life, and after the long interval of some thousand years thou wilt receive me to glory."

Ecclesiastes 12:7: "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit to God that gave it." It is confessed the word *spirit* in the Hebrew is the same with *breath*, and is represented in some places of Scripture as the spring of animal life to the body; yet it is evident in many other places, the word *spirit* signifies the conscious principle in man, or the intelligent being, which knows and reasons, perceives and acts. The Scripture speaks of being *grieved in spirit* (Isa. 54:6); Of *rejoicing in spirit* (Luke 10:21); *The spirit of a man knoweth the things of a man* (I Cor. 2:11); *There is a spirit in man*, that is, a principle of understanding (Job 32:8). And this spirit both of the wicked and the righteous at death returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7) to God, who (as I hinted before) is the Judge of all in the world of spirits, probably to be further determined and disposed of, as to its state of reward or punishment.

Isaiah 57:2: "The righteous is taken away from the evil to come; he shall enter into peace, they shall rest in their beds, each one walking in his uprightness." The soul of everyone that walketh uprightly shall at death enter into a state of peace while their body rests in the bed of dust.

Luke 9:30, 31: "And behold there talked with him [Jesus] two men, which were Moses and Elias, who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." I grant it possible that these might be but mere visions which appeared to our blessed Saviour and His apostles; but it is a much more natural and obvious interpretation to suppose that the spirits of these two great men, whereof one was the institutor and the other the reformer of the Jewish church, did really appear to Christ, who was the Reformer of the world, and the Institutor of the Christian Church, and converse with Him about the important event of His death, and His return to Heaven. Perhaps the spirit of Elijah had his heavenly body with him there, since he never died, but was carried alive to Heaven; but Moses gave up his soul at the call of God when no man was near him, and his body was buried by God himself (see II Kings 2:11; Deut. 34:1,5,6) and his spirit was probably made visible only by an assumed vehicle for that purpose.

John 5:24: "Whoso heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life and is passed from death unto life." John 6:47, 50, 51: "This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever." John 11:26: "Whoso liveth and believeth in me, shall never die," to which may be added the words of Christ to the woman of Samaria, John 4:14: "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life." I John 5:12: "He that hath the Son hath life."

The argument I draw from these scriptures is this: it is hardly to be supposed that our Saviour in this Gospel, and John in his First Epistle imitating Him, should speak such strong language concerning eternal life, actually given to and possessed by the

believers of that day, if there must be an interruption of it by total death or sleep both of soul and body for almost two thousand years, that is, till the resurrection.

Acts 7:59: "And they stoned Stephen calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Those who deny a separate state suppose that Stephen here commits his spirit, or principle of human life, into the hands or care of Christ (because the life of a saint is said to be *hid with Christ in God*, Col. 3:3, 4) that He might restore it at the resurrection, and raise him to life again. But I think this is an unnatural force put upon these words, contrary to their most obvious meaning, if we consider the context; for Stephen here had a vision of the Son of Man, or Christ Jesus, *standing on the right hand of God*, and the glory of God near him; (see vv. 55, 56). Whereupon Stephen being conscious of the existence of Christ in that glorious state, desired that He would receive his spirit and take it to dwell with Him in His Father's house; not to lie and sleep in Heaven, for *there is no night there*, but to behold the glory of Christ according to the many promises that Christ had made to His disciples, that He *would go and prepare a place for them in His Father's house*, and that they should be *with Him there to behold His glory* (John 14 and 17) which I shall have occasion to speak of afterward.

Romans 8:10, 11: "And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is life because of righteousness." That is, if Christ dwell in you by the sanctifying influences of his Spirit, it is true indeed, your body is mortal and must die, because it is doomed to death from the fall of Adam, on account of sin and because sinful principles still dwell in this fleshly body; but your soul or spirit is life, of (as some copies read instead of your own spirit lives when the body is dead, and enjoys a life of happiness, because of the righteousness imputed to you, your justification unto life (Rom. 5:17, 18, 21).

I know there are several other ways of construing the words of this verse by metaphors; but the plain and most natural antithesis which appears here between the death of the body of a saint because of sin or guilt, and the continuance of the spirit or soul in a life of peace because of justification or righteousness, and that even when the body is dead, gives a pretty clear proof that this is the sense of the apostle.

This is also further confirmed by the next verse, which promises the resurrection of the dead body in due time. "If the spirit of him that raised up Christ from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead [God the Father] shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his spirit that dwelleth in you." The spirit or soul of the saint lives without dying, because of its pardon of sin and justification and sanctification (see verse 10); and the body (not the spirit or soul) shall be quickened or raised to life again, by the blessed Spirit of God which dwells in the saints (v. 11).

II Corinthians 5:1, 2: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven." Verse 4: "We in this tabernacle groan, being burdened, not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of

life." It is evident that this house from Heaven this building of God, is something which is like the clothing of a soul divested of this earthly tabernacle (v. 1, 2) or it is the clothing of the whole person, body and soul, which would abrogate the state of mortality, and *swallow it up in life* (v. 4). For though in verse 4 the Apostle supposes that the soul doth not desire the death of the body, or that itself should be unclothed, and therefore he would rather choose to have this state of blessed immortality super-induced on his body and soul at once without dying, yet in the first verse he plainly means such a house in or from Heaven, or such a clothing which may come upon the soul immediately as soon as the *earthly house or tabernacle of his body is dissolved*. And however dubious this may appear to those who read the chapter only thus far, yet the eighth verse, which supposes good men to be present with Christ when absent from the body, determines the sense of it as I have explained it, of which more later.

Perhaps it is hard to determine whether this super-induced clothing is like the Shekinah or visible glory in which Christ, Moses, and Elias, appeared at the transfiguration, and which some suppose to have belonged to Adam in innocency; or whether it signifies only a state of happy immortality super-induced or brought in upon the departing soul at death, or upon the soul and body united as in this life, and with which those saints shall be clothed, who are *found alive at the coming of Christ* (I Cor. 15:52, 53, 54), which will not kill the body, but swallow up its mortal state in immortal life.

Let this matter, I say, be determined either way, yet the great point seems to be evident, even beyond probability, that there is a *conscious being* spoken of which is very distinct from its tabernacle, or house, or clothing, and which exists still, whatever its clothing or its dwelling be, or whether it be put off or put on. And that, when the earthly house or vessel is dissolved or put off, the heavenly house or clothing is ready at hand to be put on immediately, to render the soul of the Christian fit to be present with the Lord.

II Corinthians 12:2, 3: "I knew a man in Christ, above fourteen years ago, whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell, God knoweth; how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words." I grant this ecstasy of the Apostle does not actually show the existence of a separate state after death till the resurrection; yet it plainly manifests Paul's belief that there might be such a state, and that the soul might be separated from the body, and might exist, and think, and know, and act, in paradise, in a state of separation, and hear, and perhaps converse in the unspeakable language of that world, while it was absent from the body.

And, as I acknowledge I am one of those persons who do not believe that the intellectual spirit or mind of man is the proper principle of animal life to the body, but that it is another distinct conscious being, that generally uses the body as a habitation, engine, or instrument, while its animal life remains; so I am of opinion, it is a possible thing for the intellectual spirit, in a miraculous manner, by the special order of God, to act in a state of separation without the death of the animal body, since the life of the body depends upon breath and air, and the regular temper and motion of the solids and fluids, of which it is composed. And the apostle Paul seems here to be of the same

mind, by his doubting whether his spirit was in the body or out of the body, while it was wrapped in the third heaven and enjoyed this vision, his body being yet alive.

Philippians 1:21: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." The apostle, while he was here upon earth, spent his life in the service of Christ, and enjoyed many glorious communications from Him. *For him to live was Christ.* And, on this account, he was contented to continue here in life longer; yet he is well satisfied that death would be an advantage or gain to him. Now we can hardly suppose what gain it would be for Paul to die, if his soul immediately went to sleep and became inactive and unconscious, while his body lay in the grave, and neither soul nor body could do any service for Christ, nor receive any communications from Him, till the great rising-day. This text seems to carry the argument above a mere probability.

I Thessalonians 4: 14: "For if we believe that Jesus died, and rose again, even so them also which slept in Jesus will God bring with him." The most natural and evident sense of these words is this, that when the Man Jesus Christ (in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead) shall descend from Heaven, in order to raise the dead bodies of those that died or went to sleep in the faith of Christ, God dwelling in Him, will bring with Him the souls of His saints who were in paradise, down to earth, to be reunited to their bodies when Jesus raises them from the dead (v. 6). This, I say, is the most natural and obvious sense; other paraphrases of the words seem strained and unnatural.

I Thessalonians 5:10: "Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him." Sleep is the death of good men, in the language of the apostle (4:13, 14, 15) and sleep in this verse, can neither signify natural sleep, as verse 7, nor spiritual sloth, as verse 6; therefore it must signify death here. Now, they who sleep in Christ, in this sense, do still live together with Him in their souls, and shall live with Him in their bodies also, when raised from the dead. This exposition arises near to a certainty of evidence.

I Peter 3:18, 19, 20: "Christ was put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah." I confess this is a text that has much puzzled interpreters; in what sense Christ did *go and preach* to those ancient rebels who were destroyed by the Flood? By His Spirit working in Noah the *preacher of righteousness* in those days; or in the three days in which the body of Christ lay dead, His soul visited the spirits of those rebels in their separate state of imprisonment, on which some ground the notion of His descent into Hell. But, let this be determined as it will, the most clear and easy sense of the Apostle, when he speaks of the spirits in prison is that the souls of those rebels, after their bodies were destroyed by the Flood, were reserved in prison for some special and future design: and this is very parallel to the present circumstances of fallen angels in Jude 6: "The angels that kept not their first estate, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day." And why may not the spirits of men be as well kept in such a prison as angelic spirits?

Jude 7: “Sodom and Gomorrah are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal *fire*.” It is evident that the material fire which destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah was not eternal, for a great lake of water quickly overflowed, and now covers all that plain where the fire was kindled, which burned down those cities. It is manifest also, that, the day of resurrection and future punishment being not yet come, they do not at this time suffer the vengeance of eternal fire in their bodies. Nor can this verse, I think, be well explained to make Sodom and Gomorrah an example to deter present sinners from uncleanness, without conceding that the spirits of those lewd persons are now suffering a degree of vengeance or punishment from the justice of God, which is compared to that fire whereby their cities and their bodies were burned; and which vengeance, at the last great day, shall continue their punishment and pronounce it eternal, or kindle material fire which shall never be quenched.

The last text I shall mention is Revelation 4:9: “I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.” I confess this is a book of visions, and this place, among others, might be explained as a mere vision of the apostle, if there were no other text which confirmed the doctrine of a separate state. But, since I think there are some solid proofs of it in other parts of the New Testament, I know not why this may not be explained, at least something nearer to the literal sense of it than those will allow, who suppose the soul to sleep from death to the resurrection. Why may not the spirits of the martyrs, which are now with God, pray Him to hasten the accomplishment of His promises made to His Church, and the day of vengeance upon His irreconcilable enemies.

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