

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

Part I

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 I

The Proposal of the Question, with a Distinction of the Persons Who Oppose It

IT IS CONFESSED that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead at the last day, and the everlasting joys and the eternal sorrows that shall succeed it, as they are described in the New Testament, are a very awful sanction to the Gospel of Christ, and carry in them principles of hope and terror which should effectually discourage vice and irreligion, and become a powerful attraction to the practice of faith and love and universal holiness.

But so corrupt and perverse are the inclinations of men in this fallen and degenerate world, and their passions are so much impressed and moved by things that are present or just at hand, that the joys of Heaven and the sorrows of Hell, when set far beyond death and the grave at some vast and unknown distance of time, would have only too little influence on their hearts and lives. And though these solemn and important events are ever so certain in themselves, yet being looked upon as things a great way off they make too feeble an impression on the conscience, and their distance is used to give an indulgence to present sensualities. For this we have the testimony of our blessed

Saviour himself (Matt. 24:48). "The evil servant says, My Lord delays his coming; then he begins to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken"; and Solomon teaches us the same truth, (Eccles. 8:11): "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."

And even the good servants in this imperfect state, the sons of virtue and piety, may be too much allured to indulge sinful negligence, and yield to temptations too easily when the terrors of another world are set so far off, and their hope of happiness is delayed so long. It is granted, indeed, that this sort of reasoning is very unjust; but so foolish are our natures that we are too ready to take up with it, and to grow more remiss in the cause of religion.

Whereas, if it can be made to appear from the Word of God that at the moment of death the soul enters into an unchangeable state, according to its character and conduct here on earth, and that the recompenses of vice and virtue are in some measure to begin immediately upon the end of our state of trial; and if, besides all this, there be a glorious and a dreadful resurrection to be expected, with eternal pain or eternal pleasure both for soul and body, and that in a more intense degree, when the theater of this world is shut up and Christ Jesus appears to pronounce His public judgment on the world; then all those little subterfuges are precluded which mankind would form to themselves from the unknown distance of the day of recompense. Virtue will have a nearer and stronger guard placed about it, and piety will be attended with superior motives, if its initial rewards are near at hand and commence as soon as this life expires. The vicious and profane will be more effectually affrighted if the hour of death must immediately consign them to a state of perpetual sorrows and bitter anguish of conscience, without hope and with a fearful expectation of yet greater sorrows and anguish.

I know what the opposers of the separate state reply here: that the whole time from death to the resurrection is but as the sleep of a night, and the dead shall awake out of their graves, utterly ignorant and insensible of the long distance of time that has passed since their death. One year or one thousand years will be the same thing to them; and therefore, they should be as careful to prepare for the day of judgment, and the rewards that attend it, as they are for their entrance into the separate state at death, if there were any such state to receive them.

I grant men should be so in reason and justice; but such is the weakness and folly of our natures that men will not be so much influenced or alarmed by distant prospects, nor so solicitous to prepare for an event which they suppose to be so very far off, as they would for the same event if it commences as soon as this mortal life expires. The vicious man will indulge his sensualities and lie down to sleep in death with this comfort: "I shall take my rest here for a hundred or a thousand years, and perhaps, in all that space, my offenses may be forgotten, or something may happen that I may escape. Or let the worst come that can come, I shall have a long sweet nap before my sorrows begin." Thus the force of divine terrors is greatly enervated by this delay of punishment.

I will not undertake to determine, when the soul is dismissed from the body, whether there is any explicit divine sentence passed concerning its eternal state of happiness or misery, according to its works in this life; or whether the pain or pleasure that belongs to the separate state is not chiefly such as arises by natural consequence from a life of sin or a life of holiness, and as being under the power of an approving or a condemning conscience. But it seems to me more probable that since *the spirit returns to God that gave it, to God the Judge of all*, with whom *the spirits of the just made perfect dwell*; and, since the spirit of a Christian, when *absent from the body, is present with the Lord*, that is, Christ, I am more inclined to think that there is some sort of judicial determination of this important point, either by God himself, or by Jesus Christ, into whose hands *He has committed all judgment* (Heb. 9:27): "*It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.*" Whether immediate or more distant is not here expressly declared, though the immediate connection of the words hardly gives room for seventeen hundred [or over nineteen hundred] years to intervene. But, if the solemn formalities of a judgment be delayed, yet the conscience of a separate spirit, reflecting on a holy or a sinful life, is sufficient to begin a Heaven or a Hell immediately after death.

Among those who delay the season of recompense till the resurrection, there are some who suppose the soul to exist still as a distinct being from the body, but to pass the whole interval of time in a state of stupor or sleep, being altogether unconscious and inactive. Others again imagine that the soul itself has not a sufficient distinction from the body to give it any proper existence when the body dies; but that its existence shall be renewed at the resurrection of the body, and then be made the subject of joy or pain, according to its behavior in this mortal state.

I think there might be an effectual argument against each of these opinions raised from the principles of philosophy. I will just give a hint of them and then proceed to search what Scripture has revealed in this matter, which is of much greater importance to us, and will have a more powerful influence on the minds of Christians.

Some persons imagine the soul of man to be his blood or his breath, or a sort of vital flame, or refined air or vapor. This they suppose to be the spring or principle of his intellectual life and of all his thoughts and consciousness, as well as of his animal life. And though this soul of man dies together with the body, and has no manner of separate existence or consciousness, yet when his body is raised from the grave they suppose this principle of consciousness is renewed again, and intellectual life is given him at the resurrection as well as a new corporeal life.

But it should be considered that this conscious or thinking principle having lost its existence for a season, it will be quite a new thing, or another creature, at the resurrection; and the man will be properly another *person*, another *self*, another *I* or *he*. Such a new conscious principle or person cannot properly be rewarded or punished for personal virtues or vices of which itself cannot be conscious by any power of memory or reflection, and which were transacted in this mortal state by another distinct principle of consciousness. For if the conscious principle itself, or the thinking being, has ceased to

exist, it is impossible that it should retain any memory of former actions, since itself *began to be* but in the moment of the resurrection. The doctrine of rewarding or punishing the same soul or intelligent nature which did good or evil in this life necessarily requires that the same soul or intelligent nature should have a continued and uninterrupted existence, so that the same conscious being which did good or evil may be rewarded or punished.

So far as I can judge, the soul of man in its own nature is nothing else but a conscious and active principle, subsisting by itself, made after the image of God, who is all conscious activity. And it is still the same being, whether it be united to an animal body or separated from it. If the body dies, the soul still exists an active and conscious power or principle, or being; and if it ceases to be conscious and active, I think it ceases to be; for I have no conception of what remains.

Now, if the conscious principle continues conscious after death, it will not be in a mere conscious indolence. The good man and the wicked will not have the same indolent existence. Virtue or vice, in the very temper of this being when absent from matter or body, will become a pleasure or a pain to the conscience of a separate spirit.

I am well aware that this is a subject which has employed the thoughts of many philosophers, and I only intimate my own sentiments without presuming to judge for others. But the defense or refutation of arguments on this subject would draw me into a field of philosophical discourse, which is very foreign to my present purpose. Whether this reasoning stands or falls, it will have very little influence on this controversy with the generality of Christians, because it is a thing rather to be determined by the revelation of the Word of God. I therefore drop this argument at once, and apply myself immediately to consider the proofs that may be drawn from Scripture for the soul's existence in a separate state after death and before the resurrection.

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