

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

Part IV

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 IV

Objections Answered

HAVING POINTED OUT SO many springs of argument from the Word of God to support this doctrine, as well as from reason and tradition, I proceed now to answer some particular objections which are raised against it.

Objection I. The Scripture is so far from supposing that the soul of man is immortal, or that there is any such thing as the life of the soul continuing after the death of the body, that it often speaks of the death of the soul, if the words were translated exactly according to the original. Numbers 31: 19: *Whosoever hath killed any person* (Heb., any soul). I Samuel 22:22: *I have occasioned the death of every soul of thy father's house.* Judges 16:30: *And Samson said, Let my soul die with the Philistines.* Ezekiel 18:20: *The soul that sinneth, it shall die.* Psalm 89:48: *What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death: shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?* I Kings 19:4: *Elijah requested for himself that he might die* (Heb., that his soul might die).

Answer. The word *soul* in English, *nephesh* in Hebrew, *psyche* in Greek, and *anima* in Latin, signifies not only the conscious and active principle in man, which thinks and reasons, loves and hates, hopes and fears, and which is the proper agent in virtue or vice; but it is used also to signify the principle of animal life and motion in a living creature. And, though these two in themselves are very distinct things, yet, upon this account, the word *soul* is attributed to brutes as well as to men: for the Jews as well as some pagans in their mistaken philosophy supposed the same soul of man, which gives natural life to the body, to be also that very intellectual principle which thinks and reasons, fears and loves; and, upon this account, they gave both these principles, however distinct in themselves, one common name, and called them *the soul*.

Now, the soul or the principal of animal life and motion, being the chief or most valuable thing in an animal, it came to pass that the whole animal was called a *soul*: therefore, even birds and fishes are called *living souls* (Gen. 1:20) and any animals whatever in Scripture are called *souls* or *living souls*. And then, for the same reason, because the soul of man is his chief part, the whole person of man is called *his soul* (Gen. 2:7). *Man became a living soul*, a living person. So Exodus 1:5: *All the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls*, all the persons were seventy.

And this is not only the language of the Jews, but even of other nations. In our country we use the word *souls* to signify *persons*: so we say, *poor soul*, when we see a person in misery; we use the word a *meagre soul*, for a thin man; we say, *there were twenty souls lost in the ship*.

Now the word *soul* among the Jews being so universally used to signify *the person of man*, they used the same word to signify *the person* when he was dead as well as when he was alive (Num. 6:6): *He shall come at no dead body*, in the Hebrew no dead soul, no dead man or woman, or perhaps no dead animal.

Since the word *soul* is taken so often and so commonly to signify the person of a man or woman, no wonder that there is so frequent mention of *souls* dying in the Scripture when human persons die.

And if the *soul* signify a man or woman, when they are dead as well as when living, here is a fair account why the Scriptures may speak of the *souls going down to the grave*, or being *delivered from the grave*. Psalm 89:48: *Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?* This may either denote his principle of animal life, or his person, that is, himself.

Now this account of things is very consistent with the scriptural doctrine of the distinction of the intelligent soul of man from his body, and the intelligent soul's survival of the body, nor do any of these scriptural expressions concerning the soul forbid this supposition. For, though in some places, the word *soul* signifies the *person* of the man or his *body*, or that animal principle which may die, yet in other places it signifies that intelligent or thinking principle which cannot die, as we have before proved, where our Saviour tells us: *We should not fear them that kill the body, but cannot kill the soul*.

Wherever the Scripture speaks of a soul's being killed it means only that the person who was mortal is slain, the life of the body is destroyed, and the man considered as a compound being, made up of soul and body, is in some sense dissolved when one part of the composition dies. But where the *soul* signifies the intellectual principle in man, it is never said to die, unless when the word *death* means a loss of happiness, or living in misery; but this implies natural life still, for this soul cannot naturally be destroyed by any power but that which made it.

If any person objects that the apostle in Acts 2:31 says, *The soul of Christ was not left in hell, or the grave* (for so the word in the Hebrew may signify, Psalm 16:10, whence this is cited), there is a sufficient answer to be given to this two or three ways. It may be construed that the principle of the animal life of Christ was not left to continue in death; or that the person of the Man Jesus was not left in death or the grave, the body being sometimes put for the person; or it may be as well construed that the spirit of Christ or His intellectual soul, was not left in the state of the dead, or of separation from the body, which the word *sheol* in the Hebrew and *adās* in the Greek signify.

Here it may be observed also that the word which signifies spirit, *ruach, pneuma, spiritus*, in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and other languages, is used sometimes for air or breath, which is supposed to be the principle of life to the animal body; and sometimes it signifies the intellectual soul, the conscious and active principle in man; and therefore whatever may be said of the spirit's dying or being lost is no proof that the conscious principle in man dies, which is a very different thing from breath or air.

Perhaps it will be said here, Does not Moses suppose breath to be the soul or spirit in man, when he says (Gen. 2:7), *God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul*.

I answer, It is evident that Moses makes a plain difference between God's formation of man and brutes, for he makes no distinction between soul and body of brutes in their creation; but he distinguishes the soul from the body of man, in his creation.

But of this distinction between the soul of a brute and the soul of a man, there seems to be a plain intimation, given by Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:21): *Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?* that the spirit of man, his conscious and intellectual principle, goes upward or survives at the death of the body, but the spirit of the beast, the spring of its animal life, goes down to the earth, is mingled with the common elements of this material world and entirely lost.

The wise man in this place at least intimates that men who pretended to wisdom in that age supposed such a difference between the spirit of man and the spirit of a brute.

Objection II is taken from Psalm 6:5: "In death there is no remembrance of thee; in the grave who shall give thee thanks?" and Psalm 146:4: "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." And Ecclesiastes 9:5: "The

living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything." From all which words some would infer there is no such thing as a separate state of souls.

Answer. Both David and his son Solomon exclude all sorts of thoughts and actions, both religious and civil, from the state of death as are practiced in this life, all the pursuits of their present purposes, their present way and manner of divine worship, and their management or consciousness of human affairs. But they do not exclude all manner of consciousness, knowledge, thought, or action, such as may be suited to the invisible state of spirits. The design of the writers in those places of Scripture require no more than this, and therefore the words cannot be construed to any farther sense, or to exclude the conscious and active powers of a separate spirit from their proper exercise in that invisible world, though they have done with all their actions in the present visible state.

Objection III is taken from John 14:3: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am there ye may be also"; which seems to imply that the followers of Christ were not to be present with Him till He came again to this world to raise the dead and to take His disciples to dwell with Him.

Answer 1. It has already been granted by some persons who doubt of the separate state of all souls that the apostles had this special favor allowed them, to be received into the presence of Christ when they departed from this body. Now these words were spoken to the apostles and therefore they cannot preclude this privilege which they expected, namely, that when they were *absent from the body* they should be *present with the Lord* (II Cor. 5:8).

Answer 2. Christ came again to His disciples at His own resurrection from the dead and taught them the things of the other world, and better prepared them for the happiness of Heaven and His own presence. He also came again at their death; when He *that hath the keys of death and the invisible world* let them out of the prison of the body into the separate state, that they might dwell with Him; the *coming* of Christ has many and various senses in New Testament and need not be referred only to His coming at the day of judgment.

Answer 3. But suppose in this place the words of Christ be construed concerning His great and public coming to raise the dead. It is certain that in that day the disciples shall be received to dwell with Him in a much more complete and glorious manner, when both soul and body shall be made the inhabitants of Heaven. But this does not preclude or forbid that the separate souls of His followers should be favored with His presence in paradise before His public coming to judge the world. Though the last and greatest blessing be only mentioned here, it does not exclude the former.

Objection IV. Paul, (Phil. 3:10, 11) says that he desired to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, if by any means he might attain to the resurrection of the dead. Now what need had the apostle to be so solicitous about the resurrection if he expected to be

with Christ immediately upon his death, since being with Christ is the state of ultimate happiness?

Answer 1. Some learned men suppose that the apostle here presses after some peculiar exaltations of piety in this world, and after an interest in some *first resurrection*, or resurrection of the martyrs and most eminent saints, which would be long before the general resurrection of all the dead, according to the visions of John (Rev. 20:4-7). But as I am not sufficiently acquainted with the sense of that prophecy to determine my opinion on this side, I proceed to other answers.

Answer 2. What if the words of Paul in this place to the Philippians should mean no more than this (vv. 13, 14), *I forgot the things that are behind*, as though I had gained so little already as not to be worth my notice; *and I reach forth unto those things which are before*, further degrees of holiness to be obtained, pressing towards the mark of perfection, *if by any means I might be made so conformable to the death of Christ*, as to be entirely dead to sin, and *if by any means I might attain to the resurrection of the dead*, that is, to such a perfection of holiness as is represented by the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6) or as that in which the *dead saints shall be raised*; for I know *I have not already attained it, nor am already perfect*.

Answer 3. Suppose the soul of Paul to be present with Christ after death, in Heaven, in the separate state, yet this is not the ultimate or highest happiness of the saints, and therefore he aimed at something higher and further, namely, the more complete happiness which he should enjoy at the resurrection of the dead.

Objection V. Borrowed from several verses of I Corinthians 15, where the apostle is imagined to argue thus: *If there be no resurrection of the dead . . . Then they which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished . . . Then we have hope only in this life*, and nothing else to support us. Then verse 32. *What advantage do I get by all my sufferings for Christ, if the dead rise not?* We had better comply with the appetites of the flesh, and enjoy a merry life here. *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*; whereby it is evident that the Apostle places the blessed expectation of *those that are fallen asleep in Christ* only and entirely upon their being *raised from the dead*, which he would not have done if there had been such a separate state: he extends our hope in Christ beyond this life, and raises his own expectation of advantage or reward for his sufferings on the account of the Gospel entirely and only upon the resurrection of the dead, having no notion of any happiness in a separate state of souls. For if he had any such opinion or hope, this expectation of the happiness of the soul in a separate state might have been a sufficient proof that those who died or slept in the faith of Christ, are not perished, and he had abundant reward for his sufferings in that world of separate souls without the resurrection of the body.

Answer 1. It must be granted that the Scripture, in order to support Christians under present trials, chiefly refers them to the day of the resurrection and final judgment, as the great and chief season of retribution; the reason of this will appear under my answer to a following objection. Now the Apostle may be supposed to argue here only on this

footing, neglecting or overlooking the separate state, as though this final retribution at and after the resurrection of the body were comparatively the whole, because it is far the chief and most considerable part, being much the most sensible and conspicuous and of the longest duration. The chief part of anything is often taken for the whole; and if there were no resurrection of the dead, if there were no state of retribution at all, then the Epicurean reasoning would be good: *Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.*

And, to confirm this exposition, we may take notice that in other places of Scripture, where the resurrection of the dead is mentioned, this *anastasis* includes the whole state of existence after death, both the separate and the resurrection state. This seems to be the sense of it in that famous place, Luke 20:35, where Christ argues with the Sadducees, who denied the separate state, as well as the resurrection of the body. Now if you take away this *anastasis*, this whole state of existence and retribution, then they that suffer for Christ have no advantage or recompense, and the Epicurean doctrine is plainly preferable, at least in the common sense and reasoning of men, and in such seasons of trial and persecution.

Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that there might be some of these principles of Sadduceeism begun to be instilled into some of the Corinthians, namely, that there were no rewards and punishments at all in any future state. For he tells them (v. 34) that some of them *had not the knowledge of God*, that is, as a righteous rewarder of them that diligently seek Him: *I speak this, says he, to your shame.* And in verse 58 he encourages them to be *steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for as much as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.* There is certainly a future state of recompense for piety, and the discovery of it at the resurrection of the dead is the most public and glorious part of it, and therefore he insists upon this alone.

Answer 2. But we may yet give a more particular answer to this objection: for if we take in the whole scheme of the Apostle's argument in this chapter, we shall find there is no sufficient ground for this objection against a separate state. He begins (vv. 12, 13, if.) and argues thus: *If there be no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen*, for He rose as the *first fruits* and His followers shall be the harvest (v. 23). But if there be no harvest, there were no first fruits: and *if Christ be not risen, then our preaching is vain, and your faith is vain* (v. 14). *Then we are found false witnesses in matters that relate to God* (v. 15), mere imposters, who preach a wicked falsehood and lead you to hope for a happiness which ye shall never obtain. For *if Christ, who died for our sins* (v. 3) *be not raised for our justification* [as in Rom. 4:25], *then are ye yet in your sins*, ye lie yet under the guilt of sin; and if so, *then also they which are fallen asleep in Christ*, or have died in the faith of Christ, *are perished* (v. 18). They must either be condemned or be utterly lost both soul and body, having no ground for hope of eternal life, or any life or happiness at all hereafter. Then the hope of Christians would be in this life only, and we are miserable creatures, who suffer so much for Christ's sake (v. 19). It would be better for us, who have senses and appetites as well as other men, to indulge these senses and appetites and *eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*, and there is an end of us. There can be no future state of happiness of any kind for us to expect, either in soul or body, if we have deceived you in the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ, and all our Gospel be

false. We are then such sort of impostors and wicked cheats as can have no belief of a future state of rewards or punishments, and we had better act like ourselves and, like mere Epicureans, give ourselves up to all present pleasures, than expose ourselves to perpetual sufferings for the sake of a Man, who (if there be no resurrection) died and never rose again, and therefore cannot make us any recompense. Now this sort of arguing does not at all preclude the separate state of happiness, but rather establishes it.

I might add here a further answer to this objection: the Apostle is representing the sufferings of the body for Christ's sake (vv. 30, 31, 32) and therefore he thinks it proper to encourage Christians with the recompense of the resurrection of the body, without taking any particular notice of the happiness of the separate state of the soul. And in this view of things his argument stands good. If there be no resurrection of the body, there is no recompense for sufferings in the body; let us then give the body its pleasures of sense. *Let us eat and drink* while we live, for there is an utter end of us in death. But (saith he, v. 33) such evil traditions corrupt all good manners, and therefore they are not, they cannot, be true. There must be a resurrection of the body, to encourage sufferings in the body for the sake of virtue and religion.

Objection VI. Does not the New Testament constantly refer the rewards and punishments of good and bad men to the time of the resurrection of the dead, or the second coming of Christ? Is it not with this prospect it terrifies the sinner? Is it not with this it comforts the good man and supports him under his present sufferings? It would be endless to cite all the particular texts on this occasion. That one text, I Thessalonians 4:14, speaks the sense of many others, and is sufficient to be cited here. The Apostle persuades Christians not to *mourn for the dead, as those that sorrow without hope*, and gives this reason: *for those who sleep in Jesus, God will bring with him*, when He comes to raise the dead, and then *they shall be forever with the Lord*. And he bids them *comfort one another with these words*. Whereas their comforts had been much nearer at hand if he could have told them of the separate state of happiness which the departed souls of their friends at present enjoyed; and if there had been any such state, he had the fairest opportunity here to introduce it.

Answer. This very text I have mentioned before as a proof of the separate state, and it is plain the Apostle seems to hint it, though he does not insist upon it, when he supposes the soul of the deceased to be with Christ already; for he says *God will bring them with him*, from Heaven, when He comes to raise their bodies.

But to give a more general answer to the objection, as drawn from the silence of Scripture, in many places, about this doctrine of the separate state.

There are good reasons why the New Testament more sparingly mentions the separate state of souls, and most frequently (but not constantly) refers both rewards and punishments to the resurrection.

1. Because the heathen themselves (at least the wisest and best of them) did believe some sort of future state of happiness or misery, into which the souls of men should be disposed when they departed from these bodies, according to the vices or virtues they had practiced in this life; and they derived this doctrine from their reasonings upon the footing of the light of nature. The writings of Plato and his followers, and the sentiments of Socrates conveyed to us in Plato's writings, are full of this opinion, of the existence of the souls of good men in a happy state when they depart from the body. Cicero sometimes speaks of it as his opinion, his desire, and his hope, nor were other heathen writers ignorant of this doctrine; but the New Testament speaks less of this point, because it is the evident design of Christ and His apostles to lead their disciples to the more peculiar doctrines of revelation, rather than to treat them with sentiments derived from the light of nature. This doctrine of the resurrection from the dead, and the eternal rewards and eternal punishments that attend it, are more abundantly mentioned in the New Testament, because they stand so much more connected with the Gospel of Christ, and with His own resurrection from the dead, which is the evidence of its divine authority. It is Christ who rose from the dead who is appointed to raise and to judge all mankind. And therefore it is natural for the apostles in their Writings, who desire to keep the death and resurrection of Christ always in the view of their converts, to point to the awful events of that day, when their Saviour, risen from the dead, shall appear in the execution of His glorious commission, and judge the world. Thus Paul preaches to the Athenians (Acts 17:30): "God now commands all men every where to repent, because he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance to all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." And in many other places he connects our resurrection and future recompenses with the resurrection of Christ.

And in this respect, as well as in some others, the doctrine of rewards and punishments after the resurrection seems to carry such superior force in it, especially upon those who believe the Gospel, that it is no wonder the New Testament frequently refers to this great day of resurrection, and the Apostle derives the chief part of his consolations or terrors from it.

2. Then will be the public and universal retributions of vice and virtue in a more solemn manner exhibited before all the world, whereas the entrance of mankind into the recompenses of the separate state is more private and personal.

3. Then will be the day of complete rewards and punishments of man in both parts of his nature, soul and body. The separate state belongs only to the soul, and even those recompenses are but imperfect before in comparison of what they will be when body and soul are united.

4. Then will be the most glorious, visible, and sensible distinction made between the good and bad; and since this belongs to the body as well as the soul, it is very properly set before the eyes of men in the holy writings as done at the resurrection; because corporeal and sensible things work more powerfully on their imagination, and more

sensibly and effectually strike the consciences of men, than spiritual rewards and punishments in the separate state.

5. The state of rewards and punishments after the resurrection will be far the longest and most durable recompense of the good and the bad. And therefore it is called eternal so often in Scripture; *everlasting life*, and *everlasting fire* (Matt. 25:41). Whereas the retributions of the separate state are comparatively but of short duration; and this is another thing that makes a sensible impression on the hearts of men: the eternal continuance of the joys and sorrows that follow the last judgment.

Perhaps it will be replied here, that in the beginning of this essay I represented the separate state as a more effectual motive to the hopes and fears of men, because the joys and sorrows of it were so much nearer at hand than those of the resurrection. And why do I now represent the recompenses of the resurrection under such characters as are fit to have the strongest influence and become the most effectual motive?

Answer. It is granted that the recompenses after the resurrection have several circumstances that carry with them some peculiar and most powerful motives to religion and virtue; but that awful day may still seem to want this one motive, namely, the nearness of it, which belongs eminently to the recompenses of the separate state. Now, if the Scripture does really reveal the doctrine of rewards and punishments of souls immediately after death, and of soul and body together at the resurrection, then all those circumstances of effectual motive to piety are collected in our doctrine: the immediate nearness of them in the separate state, and the public appearance, the universality, the completeness, the sensibility, and the duration of them after the great rising-day.

I might yet take occasion, from this objection, to give a further reason for the apostles more frequently drawing their motives of hope and fear from the resurrection and the great judgment: even that day of recompense was generally then supposed to be near at hand, and so there was less need to insist upon the joys and sorrows of the separate state.

The patriarchs and the Jews of old, after the Messiah was promised, were constantly expecting His first coming almost in every generation till He did appear, and many modes of prophetic expression in Scripture (which speak of things long to come, as though they were present or just at hand) gave them some occasion for this expectation. So the Christians of the first age did generally expect the second coming of Christ to judgment, and the resurrection of the dead, in that very age wherein it was foretold. Paul gives us a hint of it in II Thessalonians 2:1, 2. They supposed the day of the Lord was just appearing. And many expressions of Christ concerning His return or coming again after His departure, seemed to represent His absence as a thing of no long continuance. It is true, these words of His may partly refer to the coming in of His kingdom among the Gentiles, or His coming by His messenger of death; yet they generally, in their supreme and final sense, point to His coming to raise the dead and judge the world. From the words of Christ also concerning John (21:22): *If I will that he*

tarry till I come. It is probable that the apostles themselves at first, as well as other Christians, might derive this apprehension of His speedy coming.

It is certain that when Christ speaks of His coming in general terms, He says (Matt. 24:34): *Verily I say unto you, this generation shall not pass till all these things be fulfilled.* And the apostles frequently told the world, the coming of the Lord was near (Phil. 4:5): *The Lord is at hand;* (Heb. 10:25): *Exhorting one another, so much the more as ye see the day approaching.* And that this is the day of the coming of Christ (v. 37) assures us, *For yet a little while, he that shall come will come, and will not tarry;* (Rom. 13:12): *Now it is high time to awake out of sleep. The night is far spent, the day is at hand.* (I Peter 4:5): *To him who is ready to judge the quick and the dead;* (v. 7): *The end of all things is at hand;* (James 5:8, 9): *The coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Behold, the judge standeth at the door;* (Rev. 22:10): *Seal not up the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand;* (v. 12): *And behold I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every man as his work shall be;* and the sacred Volume is closed with this assurance (v. 20): *Surely I come quickly,* and the echo, and the expectation of the Apostle or the Church: *Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus.*

It is granted that in prophetic expressions, such as all these are, some obscurity is allowed. It may be doubtful, perhaps, whether some of them may refer to Christ's destruction of Jerusalem, or His coming to call particular persons away by His messenger death, or His appearance to the last judgment. It is granted also, it belongs to prophetic language to set things far distant, as it were, before our eyes, and make them seem present, or very near at hand. But still these expressions had plainly such an influence on primitive Christians that they imagined the day of resurrection and judgment was very near. Since the prophetic words of Christ and His apostles seemed to carry this appearance in them, and to keep the church under some uncertainty, it is no wonder that the apostles chiefly referred the disciples of that age to the day of the resurrection, for comfort under their sufferings and sorrows. And, though they never asserted that Christ would come to raise the dead and judge the world in that age, yet, when they knew themselves that He would not come so soon, they might not think it necessary to give every Christian, nor every church, an immediate account of the more distant time of this great event, that the uncertainty of it might keep them ever watchful. Even when Paul informs the Thessalonians that the day of the Lord was not so very near as they imagined it (II Thess. 2:2), yet he does not put it off beyond that century by any express language.

Thus we see there is very good reason why the New Testament should derive its motives of terror and comfort chiefly from the resurrection and the day of judgment; though it be not altogether silent of the separate state of souls and their happiness or misery, commencing, in some measure, immediately after death, which fact has been before proved by many scriptures cited for that purpose.

Here let it be observed that I am not concerned in that question whether human souls, separated from their bodies, have any other corporeal vehicle to which they are united, or by which they act during the intermediate state between death and the resurrection.

All that I propose to maintain here is that that period or interval is not a state of sleep, or utter unconsciousness and inactivity: and, whether it be united to a vehicle or no, I call it still the separate state, because it is a state of the soul's separation from this body, which is united to it in the present life.

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