

The Existence & Immortality of the Soul



In some ways the Sadducees that Jesus encountered in today's Gospel reading (Luke 20:27-40) were the ancient equivalent to the modern skeptic. Unlike the modern skeptic they did not doubt the existence of God, but they did doubt the existence of any other spiritual reality. They did not believe in angels or in the immortality of the soul. That is why they were mocking the belief in the resurrection with the question about the wife with many husbands. They were making the belief look absurd.

The question of whether there is life after death, whether we have an immortal soul or not, is extremely important. The answer we give effects the attitude we have about life itself and even how we live our lives. If I was traveling on a highway that crossed much territory and beautiful scenery but ended abruptly by plunging into the precipice of a canyon - and was unable to stop my movement toward it - it would certainly effect how I thought about the journey itself. At the beginning of the journey I might be able to ignore or distract myself from that final end but I could not ignore it when it got closer. The same is true of life. If life ends with death as plunging into annihilation then that reality looms great over my entire earthly existence. I may be able to ignore or distract myself from it while young but not as I grow older and begin to watch family members and loved ones die; as well as experiencing my own physical decline. But if there were a bridge over that canyon and a new country on the other side then I would drive with a different attitude, making sure I reached the precipice at the exact location of the bridge. I would orient my entire journey to that end.

But can I know for sure that there is eternal life? Is there proof? The answer to the question "Can life after death be proven?" depends on what kind of proof you will accept. It cannot be proved like the virus theory of disease was proven when microscopes allowed the tiny organisms to be observed. It is not susceptible to scientific verification simply because empirical science deals with physical realities while life after death deals with non-physical realities. Those who claim to be rational but say they will not believe in life after death unless it is scientifically proven therefore make an impossible demand. The demand that non-physical entities submit to physical verification is a self-contradictory and so irrational expectation. The existence of the soul and its immortality can be demonstrated rationally, however, by thinking deeply about the nature of human life itself.

We have life in us. Where does this life come from? One might respond from our physical bodies. But there is a problem here. We know that all physical things (including our bodies) are made up of basic elements. However, none of these elements (nitrogen, hydrogen, calcium, oxygen, phosphorus) have life in them. Can simply combining them in complicated ways give life? But how can you get more from less? How can you get life from that which is essentially lifeless? The obvious answer is life is not in the elements but in whatever gives life to the elements. Not being in the physical elements that make up the body it must be a non-physical substance. This is what we call the soul. The classical definition of the soul is the immaterial principle that gives life to the material body. Life is loaned to the elements that make up the body, so to speak, by the soul. The soul is the life giving principle. So when the body dies the soul may not. It may simply leave the body. For it has life by its very nature.

While this argument may demonstrate the existence of an immaterial principle needed for matter to have life it does not demonstrate that the soul can exist independent of the body. For it argues that the soul is an animating *principle* not an independent life form. Would this not make them mutually dependent? Without the soul no bodily life but without the body nothing for the soul to act on. Maybe they come into existence together and go out of existence together? To hold that the soul is immortal one would have to demonstrate that the soul has existence independent of the body. This we shall now examine.

There is another way of understanding that we have something in us that is not physical by nature. Every physical thing has a physical function. Eyes see physical light. Ears hear physical sound. If there is something in us that operates beyond the physical level then it would indicate a source beyond the physical level. Is there? We do something non-physical all the time and yet

hardly notice it. We think. The brain takes in physical data from the senses and then we do something quite remarkable with that data. We abstract from it. In other words we take away the physical aspect and form ideas and concepts. "Truth", "justice", "eternity", "courage", "God" are all abstract concepts. They are not physical things. How much does truth weigh? What colour is justice? They have no weight or colour because they are non-physical things. But if the mind is only the brain, and the brain is obviously a physical organ, then it should only do physical operations. But abstraction is a non-physical function. The logical conclusion is that there must then be something in us that is non-physical to do it. It is the soul. And if the soul does things that go beyond the mere physical that means it is a form of life beyond the mere physical. Therefore it need not die when the physical body dies.

For Christians, however, the most certain assurance we have of life after death is not a philosophical proof but an historical one. It is the historical, literal resurrection of Christ. Jesus Christ is the bridge that crosses from this life over the precipice of death into the new country of Heaven, the land from which He comes. The Christian believes in life after death not mainly because of an argument but because of a witness. The Church is that witness. 'Apostolic succession' means first of all the chain of witnesses beginning with actual eyewitnesses: "We have been eyewitnesses of His resurrection. . . and we testify (witness) to you." And so this is the answer to the skeptic who asks: "What do you know for sure about life after death anyway? Have you ever been there? Have you come back to tell us?" The Christian reply is: "No, but I have a very good Friend who has. I believe Him, and I follow Him not only through life but also through death. Why don't you come and follow Him too."