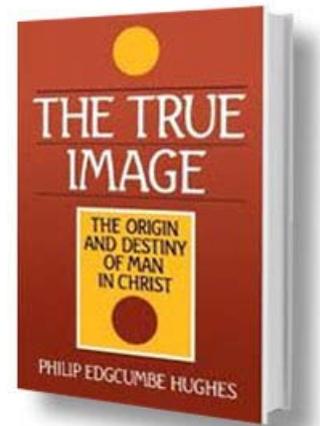


The Destiny of Man

By Philip Edgcumbe Hughes

In this chapter from one of his final works, Philip E. Hughes raises a series of questions concerning the traditional idea of "everlasting death." He notes a number of difficulties with this traditional approach, before offering his own understanding of conditional immortality, which he regards as avoiding the difficulties of the traditional approach. See also 10.2; 10.12; 10.13. Source: Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 398-407. Reprinted with the permission of the publisher.



Reviews - Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids:

"A deeply learned and spiritually enriching book by a mature evangelical scholar that brings the doctrine of Christ and the human together at the point of the image of God. . . . Hughe's skills as both a biblical scholar and a historical and systematic theologian are very evident in this work, which is his best book yet." - **Clark H. Pinnock, McMaster Divinity College**

"In this wide-ranging biblical, historical, and theological study a versatile veteran makes convincing use of the concept of the divine image to integrate the doctrines of man and Christ. Philip Hughe's biblical bases are solid, his exposition weighty, and his historical interactions judicious and enlightening. This is a very valuable piece of work." - **J. I. Packer, Regent College**

"We have come to expect both solid learning and exquisite literary style from Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. "The True Image" is no exception. Indeed it is a remarkable piece of work, quarried from a lifetime of study in biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and church history. It is encyclopedic in its discussion of anthropology and Christology and their mutual relationship. The novitate will find it instructive, while the theologically advanced will discover comprehensive exposition married to a scholarly judgment that sometimes resurrects classical views, sometimes provides the unexpected, and on occasion surprises with the controversial." - **Sinclair B. Ferguson, Westminster Theological Seminary**

Calvin's opposition to the opinion that in physical death the soul dies together with the body and in the intermediate state sleeps a sleep of death was consonant with and indeed required by his belief in the immortality of the human soul. Thus he maintained that his affirmation 'that the soul, after the death of the body, still survives, endued with sense and intellect,' was identical with the affirmation of 'the immortality of the soul'. In support of the doctrine of the soul's immortality he cited a number of biblical texts: first of all, Christ's saying in Matthew 10:28, 'Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both BODY AND SOUL in hell,' on the basis of which he had good reason for concluding that the soul survives the death of the body. But it is difficult to see how he could derive an argument for the immortality of the soul from this saying, since it would seem quite to

the contrary, to imply the soul's mortality: that God can destroy both SOUL AND BODY must surely mean that the soul is destructible.

The passages quoted by Calvin indicate that the human soul survives physical death, not that it is in itself immortal. The notion of the inherent immortality of the soul, it is true, has been generally accepted in the Christian church, and this is certainly a factor to be taken into account. The question of primary importance, however, is that of its COMPATIBILITY WITH THE BIBLICAL REVELATION. A consideration that has weighed with many defenders of this notion is the widespread conception of the soul's immortality in numerous different cultures and religions throughout the course of history, or at least the intimation of the continuation of existence beyond the grave. But this suggests an innate awareness that death is not the end of the story, indeed that man is answerable to God who is the source of his life, rather than a proof of personal or collective immortality. Another argument which has been advanced is that by reason of his creation in the image of God man must participate in the excellencies that are attributed to God of which everlasting existence is not the least; and this has been said therefore to require the postulation of human immortality. Man's formation in the image of God does indeed imply his possession of life in a manner which transcends that of other animate creatures; but it cannot mean the possession of life in the same sense as that in which God possesses it, if only because God possesses life absolutely, from eternity, whereas man possesses it derivatively and subject to the good pleasure of his Creator. The immortality of man or of the human soul is not then a necessary conclusion from this premise. It has also commonly been argued either a priori that the immortality of the soul demands the everlasting punishment of the wicked as well as the everlasting blessedness of the redeemed, or a posteriori that the endless punishment of the wicked as well as the endless blessedness of the redeemed demands the immortality of the soul.

What may be deduced from the Biblical revelation? First of all, that man as originally created was both potentially immortal and potentially mortal. In close association with this is his having been created potentially sinless, but also potentially sinful. The possibility of his sinning involved the possibility of his dying, just as the possibility of his not sinning involved the possibility of his not dying. As we have remarked earlier, this does not mean that man was originally created in a state of neutrality between righteousness and sinfulness and between living and dying; for, on the contrary, his creation in the divine image, which is the bond of his personal fellowship with his Maker, placed his existence quite positively within the sphere of godliness and life. His loving and grateful concurrence with the will of God, who is the source of his life and blessedness, would have ensured the continuation of his existence in unclouded blessing as he conformed himself to that image in which he is constituted. It was by his rebellion against his Creator that he passed from a positive to a negative relationship and brought the curse upon himself. His death, which is the sum of that curse, is also the evidence that man is not inherently immortal.

To contend that only the human soul is innately immortal is to maintain a position which is nowhere approved in the teaching of Scripture, for in the biblical purview human nature is always seen as integrally compounded of both the spiritual and the bodily. If this were not so, the whole doctrine of the incarnation and of the death and resurrection of the Son would be despoiled of meaning and reality. Man is essentially a corporeal-spiritual entity. God's warning at the beginning, regarding the forbidden tree, 'In the day that you eat of it you shall die,' was addressed to man as a corporeal-spiritual creature—should he eat of it, it as such that he would die. There is NO SUGGESTION that a part of him was undying and therefore that his dying would be in part only.

The immortality, accordingly, of which the Christian is assured is not inherent in himself or in his soul but is bestowed by God and is the immortality of the whole person in the fullness of his humanity, bodily as well as spiritual. This immortality, unearned by us, has been gained for us by the incarnate Son who, by partaking of our human nature in its fullness, both bodily and spiritual, and by dying our death, nullified the power of the devil and removed from us the fear and the sting of death (Heb. 2:14 f; 1 Cor 15:55 f). Our new life in Christ, which includes our ultimate resurrection to life and immortality, is owed entirely to God and his grace. **IT IS GOD WHO ALONE HAS IMMORTALITY**, and thus who alone may properly be described as immortal. Look at 1 Timothy 6:15, 16:

which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, **WHO ALONE HAS IMMORTALITY**, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. “

And it is for us to confess, as did the Apostle, that by virtue of God’s purpose and grace **“OUR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST HAS ABOLISHED DEATH AND BROUGHT LIFE AND IMMORTALITY TO LIGHT THROUGH THE GOSPEL”** (2 Tim. 1:9 f). The immortality which was potentially ours at creation and was forfeited in the fall is now really ours in Christ, in whom we are created anew and brought to our true destiny.

There is good reason, we believe, for suggesting that the issue of the soul’s immortality, in the sense that it is an endowment which will under no circumstances be removed, calls for some reconsideration in the light of biblical truth. We have objected that the survival of the person, or the soul, in the intermediate state between death and resurrection does not necessarily imply its everlasting survival. What God has brought into being he can also destroy. The New Testament foresees “a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15; John 5:29), when the latter “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”(Matthew 25:46) This final separation will take place “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven”; for it is then that those “who do not know God” and “who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” will “suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:7-9). This punishment is also described as being “thrown into the eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8) or “into hell, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44) and as causing weeping and gnashing of teeth to those on whom it comes (Mt. 13:36 ff).

In the Apocalypse of John the ultimate doom of the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and all their followers whose names are not found written in the book of life, together with “Death and Hades”, is to be cast into the lake burning with fire and brimstone (Rev. 2:11, 19:20, 20:6, 10, 14, 21:8). The imagery of this destruction, which is called “the second death”, reflects the judgment that overtook Sodom and Gomorrah. It is recorded that “the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that “the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace” (Gen. 19:24-28). The fate of these cities was seen as a warning and a typification of the final judgment of the wicked. Thus in Rev. 14:10 f. it is said that the beast and his worshippers “shall be tormented with fire and brimstone...and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” It was a warning meanwhile of the devastating judgment that was ready to burst upon other civilizations in the course of history—for example, Babylon, regarding which Jeremiah prophesied that “as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbor cities, says the Lord, so no man shall dwell there, and no son of man sojourn there (Jer. 50:40): and even the people of Israel, whose apostasy, Moses warned, would render “the whole land brimstone and salt,

and a burnt out waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim, which the Lord overthrew in his anger and wrath” (Deut. 29:23). And Peter gave the admonition that God “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes condemned them to EXTINCTION and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6)—(As a parenthetical note of my own here, I would like to quote the ESV which is even stronger on this same verse:

“if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;” (This seems to say very strongly that it is EXTINCTION that is going to happen to the ungodly)

“The terrible fate of the cities of the plain is thus a paradigm not only of the divine retribution which obliterates cities and communities but especially of the final judgment of the world by which the destroyers of the earth will be destroyed and the creation purged of all defilement (Rev. 11:18, 21:8, 27) (Parenthetical note of my own) Look at Rev. 11:18:

The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” (Destroying the destroyers)

Revelation 21:8:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Also Malachi 4:1 is very instructive:

“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. “

Now look at 2 Peter 3:7

But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

Jude 6, 7 says:

And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day— just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Even though this was not the final judgment, the obliterating fire is described as eternal fire. The reason for this, no doubt, is that it was a divine fire, the fire of judgment sent by the Lord; for obviously in the case of these cities the fire was not eternally endured by their inhabitants. It was fire that struck and left devastation from which no restoration could follow. This consideration may reasonably raise the question whether the eternal and unquenchable fire of the final judgment will be eternally endured by those who are consigned to it. Is this what is meant by “everlasting punishment” and by the assertion regarding those who suffer it that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” (Rev 14:11)? Such terminology can certainly bear the inference that the torment of the damned in hell will be endlessly continued; and this inference has been thought, as we mentioned, to provide an appropriate balance for the doctrine of the everlasting life which, as is universally agreed, the redeemed are to enjoy without end or term. It is a balance on which, for example, Augustine insisted.

The logic of this interpretation is sound enough so long as it is punishment that is spoken of as being endless. But, as we have seen, the ultimate contrast is between everlasting life and everlasting death, and this clearly shows that it is not simply synonyms but also antonyms with which we have to reckon. There is no more radical antithesis than that between life and death, for life is the absence of death and death is the absence of life. Confronted with this antithesis, the position of Augustine cannot avoid involvement in the use of contradictory concepts, for the notion of death that is everlastingly endured requires the postulation that the damned be kept endlessly alive to endure it. Thus Augustine was forced to argue that for those in hell “death will not be abolished, but will be eternal”, and that “the living bodies of men hereafter will be such as to endure everlasting pain and fire without ever dying”, and he depicted the wicked as everlastingly doomed to “drag out a miserable existence in eternal death without the power of dying.” It would be hard to imagine a concept more confusing than that of death which means existing endlessly without the power of dying. This is however the corner into which Augustine (in company with many others) argued himself.

The difficulty of equating everlasting death with everlasting existence was compounded in the case of Augustine by reason of the fact that he took the unquenchable flames of eternal fire to be meant in a literal sense. In facing the question how it would be possible for resurrected persons of body and soul to be kept from being consumed by these flames he invoked the support of scientific fact, as he thought it to be, that certain lower creatures, and in particular the salamander, “can live in the fire, in burning without being consumed, in pain without dying.” It was decidedly shaky support because the naturalists known to him reported this competence of the salamander with skepticism as a traditional or legendary notion. But in any case the supposed ability of the salamander was irrelevant, because it is not a capacity shared by human beings with salamanders, and Augustine had to resort to the hypothesis that in the flames of hell the wicked would in this respect become salamander-like: “Although it is true,” he wrote, “that in this world there is no flesh which can suffer pain and yet cannot die, yet in the world to come there will be flesh such as there is not now, as there will also be death such as there is not now.”

Augustine, in short, found it necessary to introduce a change in the meaning of DEATH if his belief in the endlessness of the torments of hellfire was to be sustained; and this is a necessity for all who understand eternal destruction in this way, whether or not they consider the flames of hell to be intended in a literal sense. Such persons can indeed claim to be in good company; but they should be aware that their interpretation is open to serious questioning. Apart from the fact that that it involves a drastic change in the meaning of death so that, in this eschatological perspective, it signifies being kept alive to suffer punishment without the power of dying, some other considerations must be taken into account.

First of all, because LIFE and DEATH are radically antithetical to each other, the qualifying adjective ETERNAL or EVERLASTING needs to be understood in a manner appropriate to each respectively. Everlasting life is existence that continues without end, and everlasting death is destruction without end, that is, destruction without recall, the destruction of obliteration. Both life and death hereafter will be everlasting in the sense that both will be irreversible: from that life there can be no relapse into death, and from that death there can be no return to life. The awful negation and the absolute finality of the second death are unmistakably conveyed by its description as “the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9)

Secondly, immortality...is not inherent in the constitution of man as a corporeal-spiritual creature, though, formed in the image of God, the potential was there. That potential, which was forfeited through sin, has been restored and actualized by Christ, the incarnate Son, who has “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). Since inherent immortality is uniquely the possession and prerogative of God:

"which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who ALONE has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen” (1 Timothy 6:15, 16).

“It will be by virtue of his grace and power that when Christ is manifested in glory our mortality, if we are then alive, will be superinvested with immortality and our corruption, if we are then in the grave, will be clothed with incorruption, so that death will at last be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 2 Cor. 5:1-5). And thus at last we shall become truly and fully human as the destiny for which we were created becomes an everlasting reality in Him who is the True Image and the True Life. At the same time those who have persisted in ungodliness will discover for themselves the dreadful truth of Christ’s warning about fearing God, “who can DESTROY BOTH BODY AND SOUL IN HELL” (Matt. 10:28)

Thirdly, the everlasting existence side by side of heaven and hell would seem to be incompatible with the purpose and effect of the redemption achieved by Christ’s coming. Sin, with its consequences of suffering and death is foreign to the design of God’s creation. The renewal of creation demands the elimination of sin and suffering and death. Accordingly, we are assured that Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Heb. 9:26; 1 John 3:5), that through his appearing death has been abolished (2 Tim 1:10), and that in the new heaven and the new earth, that is, in the whole realm of the renewed order of creation, there will be no more weeping or suffering, “and death shall be no more” (Rev. 21:4). The conception of the endlessness of the suffering of torment and of the endurance of “living” death in hell stands in contradiction to this teaching. It leaves a part of creation which, unrenewed, everlastingly exists in alienation from the new heaven and the new earth. It means that suffering and death will never be totally abolished from the scene. The inescapable logic of this position was accepted, with shocking candor, by Augustine, who affirmed that “after the resurrection, when the final, universal judgment has been completed, there will be two kingdoms, each with its own distinct boundaries, the one Christ’s, the other the devil’s, the one consisting of good, the other of bad.” To this it must be objected that with the restoration of all things in the new heaven, and the new earth, which involves God’s reconciliation to himself of ALL THINGS, whether on earth or in heaven (Acts 3:21; Col. 1:20), there will be no place for a second kingdom of darkness and death. Where all is light there can be no darkness: for “the night shall be no more” (Rev. 22:5). When Christ fills all in all and God is everything to everyone (Eph. 1:23; 1 Cor. 15:28), how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fulness and by its

very presence contradicts it? The establishment of God's everlasting kingdom of peace and righteousness will see the setting free of the whole created order from its bondage to decay as it participates in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:21).

Fourthly, the glorious appearing of Christ will herald the death of death. By his cross and resurrection Christ has already made the conquest of death, so that for the believer the fear and sting of death have been removed (Heb. 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:54-57), the passage from death to life is a present reality (John 5:24), and the resurrection power of Jesus is already at work within him, no matter how severely he may be afflicted and incommoded outwardly (2 Cor. 4:11, 16). We do not yet see everything in subjection to the Son (Heb. 2:8); but nothing is more sure than that every hostile rule and authority and power will finally be destroyed, including death itself. Hence the assurance that "the last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Without the abolition of death the triumph of life and immortality cannot be complete (2 Tim. 1:10). This is the significance of the SECOND DEATH: it will be the abolition not only of sin and the devil and his followers but also of death itself as, in the final judgment, not only will Death and Hades give up their dead for condemnation but Death and Hades themselves will be thrown with them into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15) Hence the clear promise that "death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:4):

And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:13-15)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev. 21:1-4)

Though held by many, it is a hollow contention that if the death sentence pronounced at the final judgment against the unregenerate meant their annihilation the wicked would be getting off lightly and would be encouraged to regard the consequence of their sin without fear. (It may be interposed that far more does the expectation of the never-ending torment of finite creatures raise the question of the purpose that might be served by such retribution.) There is altogether no room for doubting that, first, at the last judgment God will mete out condign punishment in accordance with the absolute holiness of his being, and second, the Scriptures allow no place whatsoever to the wicked for complacency as they approach that dreadful day when they will stand before the tribunal of their Righteous Creator. This ultimate Day of the Lord is depicted as a day of indescribable terror for the ungodly, who will then be confronted with the truth of God's being which they had unrighteously suppressed and experience the divine wrath which previously they had derided. They will then learn at first hand that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). There is nothing light or laughable in the terrible scene witnessed by St. John in his apocalyptic vision:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:15-17)

The horror of everlasting destruction will be compounded, moreover, by the unbearable agony of exclusion. To be inexorably excluded from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his kingdom, to see but to be shut out from the transcendental joy and bliss of the saints as in light eternal they glorify their resplendent Redeemer, to whose likeness they are now fully and forever conformed, to be plunged into the abyss of irreversible destruction, will cause the unregenerate of mankind the bitterest anguish of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Too late will they then wish they had lived and believed differently. The destiny they have fashioned for themselves will cast them without hope into the abyss of obliteration. Their lot, whose names are not written in the Lamb’s book of life, is the destruction of the second death. Thus God’s creation will be purged of all falsity and defilement, and the ancient promise will be fulfilled that ‘the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind as the multitude of the redeemed are glad and rejoice forever in the perfection of the new heaven and the new earth (Isaiah 65:17 f; Rev. 21:1-4).