

**OUR DESTINY:
DEATH, INTERMEDIATE STATE, & RESURRECTION**

Jerry Truex; January 30, 2011

A. Introduction

Today we finish our series on human beings in biblical and theological perspective. The topic of theological anthropology is vast and we have only been able to highlight a few areas.

Today we will look at a monistic, materialist view of human beings, which says that we are totally physical and when our physical bodies die, that is it.

I will contrast that with a dualistic view of human beings, which says that we are mind and body, and when our physical bodies die, our minds continue to exist until God gives us our final resurrection bodies sometime in the future.

B. Monistic View and Physical Materialism

1. Naturalism

Naturalism assumes that everything that exists is physical or material. Human beings are entirely physical or material; human functioning can be explained entirely by the natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology.

In this view, there is no such thing as a nonphysical human soul or spirit. This position is often considered the consensus view among scientists, philosophers, and theologians.¹

The vast number of contemporary philosophers and neuroscientists hold that humans are physical or material realities; we should talk about the brain, and notions of a mind, soul, or consciousness should be eliminated.² Many theologians are also moving toward some type of physicalist account of the human being and combining it with Hebrew monism.³

¹ Mark C. Baker and Stewart Goetz (eds.), *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul* (New York: Continuum, 2011) 7.

² For example, this position, often called "eliminative materialism" or "reductive materialism," is held by Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1992); Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Penguin, 2002); Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul: Two Visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them* (New York: Basic, 2002); Patricia Smith Churchland, *Brain-Wise: Studies in Neurophilosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2002).

³ For example, Joel L. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

2. Hebrew monism

It is argued by modern biblical scholars and theologians the Semitic or Hebrew perspective of the human person is monistic; the OT sees the person as a holistic reality and not divisible into different parts, like a body and soul. Moreover, they argue that biblical terms like soul, body, mind, heart, and spirit are nontechnical terms referring to the whole person for different aspects. In contrast, they argue, that the ancient Greek perspective was dualist—the person is body and soul—and that is alien to the Bible.

a. Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976)

The famous twentieth-century German theologian, Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) said, “Man does not consist of two parts, much less three.... man is a living unity.”⁴

b. John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983)

John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983) claims that the antithesis between a *mortal body* and an *immortal soul* is foreign to the Hebrew mind.⁵

c. Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928 -)

The German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, states, “The distinction between body and soul as two completely different realms of reality can no longer be maintained.... The separation between physical and spiritual is artificial.”⁶

d. Nancey Murphy

Nancey Murphy is a professor of theology and philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, a self-ascribed Anabaptist, ordained in the Church of the Brethren, and well-known for her writings on theology and neuroscience

Murphy argues for what she calls “non-reductive physicalism.” Humans are entirely physical; there is no non-physical soul or mind. She even suggests that theologians should stop using the term “soul”. However, the capacities usually attributed to the soul or mind—thoughts, feelings, consciousness—arise (emerge) from the brain, depend on the brain for existence, but cannot be reduced to neural events.⁷

⁴ James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005) 121.

⁵ James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005) 122.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970) 47-8.

⁷ Although a physicalist, Murphy rejects “neuobiological determinism” and reductive forms of materialism. See Nancey Murphy “Nonreductive Physicalism,” in *In Search of the Soul: Four views of the Mind-Body Problem*, edited by Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005) 116.

I think that the payoff for modern theologians, who advocate for a totally physical view of the human person, is that their theological anthropology fits well with modern neuroscientists, most of whom hold a physicalist view. In this way, there is no conflict between theology and neuroscience. Saving souls is not about separating the spiritual from the material; rather, saving souls and meeting physical needs become the same thing.

3. Death

From this perspective—often argued as the OT perspective—death was the end of personal existence with some hope for resurrection. The Hebrew hope was not immortality of the soul or disembodied existence, but a resurrected, physical body.

C. Dualist View and the Intermediate State

In contrast to the material-monistic perspective, a Christian dualist perspective argues that the person is mind and body.⁸ Both mind and body function as a unity in this life—mutually interactive and mutually dependent—but when the body dies, the mind (soul/spirit) continues to exist in an intermediate state.⁹

1. The OT and the intermediate state

In the OT, there is a very interesting story of King Saul, who wanted to consult the medium at Endor, so that he might contact the spirit of Samuel, who had recently died (1 Sam. 28: 3-19).

1 Samuel 28:8, 13. ⁸ So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. And he said, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you...." ¹³ The king said to her, "Have no fear; what do you see?" The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being (Heb. *'elohim*; Gk. *theous*) coming up out of the ground...." (NRSV)

King Saul asked the medium to consult Samuel's spirit for him, even though it was forbidden in Israel. So she conjures up Samuel, who appears ghostly form—literally, she says, "I see divine beings (Heb. *'elohim*; Gk. *theous*) coming up out of the ground." Then the ghost of Samuel enters into a conversation with King Saul.

Where did the spirit of the deceased Samuel come from? The place of the dead in Jewish Scriptures is called *Sheol*. "*Sheol* has a variety of meanings, including simply

⁸ For a philosophical defense of "substance dualism," see Mark C. Baker and Stewart Goetz (eds.), *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul* (New York: Continuum, 2011); Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Revised Edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁹ For a biblical defense of body-soul dualism and the "intermediate state," see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Robert H. Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); J. P. Moreland & Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000).

the grave itself." It's the shadowy realm of the dead without flesh and bones. "Life in *Sheol* is often depicted as lethargic, inactive and resembling an unconscious coma."¹⁰

Psalm 16:10. For Thou wilt not abandon my soul (Heb. *nephesh*; Gk. *psychē*) to Sheol; Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. (NASB)

Psalm 49:15. But God will redeem my soul (Heb. *nephesh*; Gk. *psychē*) from the power of Sheol; For He will receive me. Selah. (NASB)

Psalm 146:4. When their spirit (Heb. *ruach*; Gk. *pneuma*) departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. (NIV) [Note: NRSV translates *ruach* as "breath" instead of "spirit"]

Isaiah 14:9 Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; it rouses the shades [the spirits of the departed] to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations. (NRSV)

All of these OT texts depict death as *the end of bodily existence*, but assume the continuation of the person's existence in Sheol.

2. The NT and the intermediate state

When we turn to the NT, the main focus is on the bodily resurrection in light of Jesus' own resurrection. Nevertheless, a number of NT texts depict an intermediate state between bodily death and resurrection.

a. Paradise (Lk 23:42-43)

Consider Jesus' statement to thief dying on the cross next to him.

Luke 23:42-43. ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (NRSV)

Jesus' last words to the man dying was included the word, "today"—before the sun goes down. The word "Paradise" was an Old Persian term for existence that is positive, harmonious, and timeless. It came to be associated with the Garden of Eden (Rev. 4:7; Ezek 28:13; 36:35) and the Paul associates it with one of the levels of heaven (2 Cor 12:2-4). Jesus says the man will be with him in paradise that very day when he dies. It is not a reference to some future resurrection; the thief *with* be with Jesus that day (Friday), whereas Jesus will not be resurrected for three days (Sunday). So Paradise is an intermediate state between death and resurrection.

¹⁰ J. P. Moreland & Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 32.

b. Giving up the spirit (Matt 27:50; Lk 23:46)

There are also many NT texts that talk about death as giving up the spirit (*pneuma*). Consider the death of Jesus. When Jesus died, Matt 27:50 and John 19:30 say, "He gave up his spirit." Luke 23:46 reports that Jesus committed his spirit to his Father.

Luke 23:46 Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

But what does spirit or *pneuma* mean? Does the spirit (*pneuma*) merely mean "breath" or "life-force," as it often does in the OT? Or is it something more?

It probably means "the departure of personal existence to another realm." It doesn't make sense for Jesus to commit his exhaled air to God. It sounds more like Jesus is yielding his life or existence to God.

Just a chapter later in Luke 24:37, Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room and he says to them, "Peace be with you." They are startled because they think they have seen a "ghost" or spirit (*pneuma*). So Luke uses the word *pneuma* to refer to the appearance of a deceased person, not breath.¹¹

c. Soul without body (Matt 10:28)

Matthew 10:28 is another verse that suggests physical death involves the dissolution or disconnection of the soul from the body.

Matthew 10:28. Do not fear those who kill the body (*sōma*) but cannot kill the soul (*psychē*); rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (NRSV)

The point Matthew is making is that human beings might be able to your body, but they cannot kill what your essential self, your soul. When people kill the body, the soul continues to exist.

d. "Out of the body" (2 Cor 12:2-4)

The Apostle Paul was a mystic and in 2 Cor 12:2-4, Paul talks about one of his ecstatic experiences.

2 Corinthians 12:2-4. ² I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of (*ektos*) the body I do not

¹¹ John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 115.

know; God knows. ³ And I know that such a person—whether in the body or apart from (chōris) the body I do not know; God knows-- ⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (JT)

Here Paul raises the possibility of a temporary disembodied existence—not after death—but during his life. The prepositions *ektos* and *chōris* denote separation or distancing from the body.

- out of (*ektos*) the body
- apart from (*chōris*) the body

Some might argue that Paul is not actually saying that he left the body, but only that he had a trance-like experience in which he was unaware of his body or earthly surroundings.

But this is unlikely, because he emphatically asserts *twice* he was taken up to heaven or paradise. At least Paul is raising the possibility that a person can have an out-of-the-body experience, which raises problems for the monist. If Paul were a monist, this would be inconceivable.

e. “In the body is away from the Lord” (2 Cor 5:1-10)

One more important text that deal with the intermediate state is 2 Cor 5:1-10. This is a difficult passage to interpret. At least eight different classes of interpretation can be found. The passage can be divided into two parts.

2 Corinthians 5:1-10. ¹ For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling-- ³ if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life...

⁶ So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord..... ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

In the first part (verse 1-5), Paul seems to say when our earthly body or tent dies, we will be given a heavenly or spiritual dwelling (building from God). Some think this refers to an instantaneous resurrection; that is, at death, we are given a resurrection body or building from God and it is experienced as immediate. However, based on verse 6-10, the building from God may not refer to the resurrected body, but simply a disembodied state.

In the second part (verse 6-10), Paul makes a sharp contrast between:

- Being at home in the body (our body still lives) is absence from the Lord
- Being absent from the body (our body has died) is home with the Lord

Verse 6-10 clearly implies that death of the physical body leads to a disembodied existence with God, either temporarily or permanently. No resurrection embodiment is mentioned.

3. Near-Death Experiences (NDE)

Let's look at the phenomena of near-death experiences (NDE). What exactly happens at death? The body/brain dies. But does the mind die with it? The Bible says no, but now some neuroscientists also say, "Perhaps not."

The story of Pam Reynolds¹²

In 1991, thirty-five-year old Pam Reynolds began to suffer dizziness, loss of speech, and difficulty moving. Her CAT scan showed a giant basilar artery aneurysm (a large swollen blood vessel in the brain stem). If it burst, it would kill.

Reynolds agreed to undergo a special technique called hypothermic cardiac arrest, or "Operation Standstill." Her neurosurgeon, Robert Spetzler (the Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix), would take her body down to a temperature so low that she would be essentially dead. A cold brain could be operated on with less risk. When the surgery was over, they would bring her back to normal temperature.

As the surgery began, her temperature was taken down to 60 Fahrenheit. Her heart stopped. Her EEG brain waves disappeared. Her vital signs ceased. She was essentially dead when her surgeon began to cut through her skull.

Later she reported that, at that time, "she felt herself 'pop' outside her body and hover above the operating table. From her out-of-body position, she could see the doctors working on her lifeless body." She said, "I thought the way they had my head shaved was very peculiar. I expected them to take all the hair, but they did not." She was able to describe what happened during the operation and what the nurses in the operating room had said.

During the surgery, she also became aware of floating out of the operating room and traveling down a tunnel with light. She saw deceased relatives and friends waiting at the end of the tunnel, including her deceased grandmother. She entered a brilliant, and wonderfully warm and loving Light and sense that her soul was part of God and that everything in existence was created from the Light. This experience ended when her deceased uncle led her back to her body. She compared reentering her body to "plunging into a pool of ice."

¹² Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 153-56.

There have been many near-death experiences reported, but Pam Reynolds's case was unique, because she was fully instrumented under medical observation and known to be clinically dead and because she was able to recall verifiable fact about her surgery that she could not have known.

Pam Reynolds's case suggests that (1) the mind or consciousness and the self can continue when the brain is no longer functional and clinical death has been reached; (2) religious and mystical experience can occur when the brain is not functioning. Both of these facts seriously challenge the monistic, materialistic view of the brain.

There have been many research studies and books written about NDE, sometimes called "Life after Life" experiences. One researcher, Van Lommel identified five types of typical NDE:¹³

1. Out-of-body experience (OBE)
2. Holographic life review
3. Encounter with deceased relatives or friends
4. Return to the body
5. Disappearance of fear of death.

Even blind people sometimes report that they "see" during a NDE. Vicki Umipeg had been born blind, her optic nerve completely destroyed at birth when she was given too much oxygen in the incubator.¹⁴ Nevertheless, her NDE unfolded just like a sighted person's experience.

5. Death

The biblical passage we just looked at suggests that when the human body dies, human beings continue to exist in a conscious, disembodied state.

Contemporary accounts of *near-death experiences* support the view of an intermediate state. When we die, we enter into a conscious, disembodied intermediate state. But the intermediate state is not the final state.

D. Resurrection

I've focused on the intermediate state, because it highlights that our essential, eternal selves are inseparably linked to our minds (souls/spirits) and that our bodies, while inextricable from our soul/spirits in this life, do not constitute our essential selves.

¹³ Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 157-8.

¹⁴ Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 158.

However, the intermediate state is not the final end-point of life. Rather, resurrection of the body, reunite with our soul/spirit, is the final state of human existence and the focal point of Christian hope.

Death of the body is fully conquered in bodily resurrection. Just as Jesus has been resurrected in some type of bodily form—a new physicality—so will all people who have physically died. This general resurrection will happen in the historical future.

a. Old Testament

Belief in resurrection appears in the Old Testament. Some traditions within the Hebrew Scriptures envision a resurrection from the dead sometime in the futures as part of Israel's hope for restoration. Here's an example from Isaiah written in the late 8th century BCE:

Isaiah 26:19. *Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise... and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (NRSV)*

The Book of Daniel, written between 5th and 2nd centuries BCE, also envisions a future resurrection of the dead, both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Daniel 12:2. *Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (NRSV)*

The most important and elaborate description of resurrection comes from the Prophet Ezekiel written during the Exile about 550 BCE. The entire chapter of Ezekiel 37 focuses on resurrection and restoration of Israel. Here's a snippet.

Ezekiel 37:1-6. ¹ The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." (NRSV)

b. New Testament

When we turn to the New Testament, we find belief in the resurrection is taught with stunning clarity. Jesus taught the bodily resurrection of the dead as the final state of human existence. Here are a couple of texts.

Matthew 22:30-33.³⁰ For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. ³¹ And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ³² 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living." ³³ And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching. (NRSV)

John 5:28-29.²⁸ Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and will come out-- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (NRSV)

Like Jesus, Paul also taught that bodily resurrection—which he calls a “spiritual body”—was the final state of human existence.

1 Corinthians 15:42-44.⁴² So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body (*sōma psychikon*), it is raised a spiritual body (*sōma pneumatikon*). If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

E. Reflections

I’ve argued that a monistic, materialist view of human beings is not in accord with the biblical view and is not supported by near-death experiences. Rather, we should embrace the notion and the hope that when our physical bodies die, our soul or spirit continues to exist in the presence of God, with Jesus, in an intermediate state of consciousness and that, one day, God will give us a new resurrected body to inhabit.