

Immortal vs. Eternal

1 Corinthians 15:35-44 Thomas Logion 42 October 2, 2011

Dedicated to Jim & Joan

I. Before we start let us take a moment to really take in and meditate for a moment on the Gospel of Thomas' Logion 42.
Come into being as you pass away.

A. Just say it over to yourself a few times and try to understand what Jesus may have been trying tell us in this statement.

B. Now how does it relate to Paul's teaching that "*What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.*"

II. So in my attempt to address some more of the questions that were given to me when we did the instant sermons a few weeks back--

I came upon this one question that at first seemed rather incongruent or disconnected but upon further consideration made more sense to me.

A. In any case, it was a question that required me to think about it a bit more than I was able to do in the extemporaneous environment of the instant sermon.

- B. The question was this:**
“Concerning immortality; what is the difference between nature and God if there is any?”
- C. So my first thoughts when I read this question were that these were addressing two different topics and one was not necessarily related to the other.**
1. It seemed that the first part was dealing with immortality, which is a human issue, and the second part of the question was dealing with the nature of God, which was unrelated to the human issue.
 2. However, as I took time to think about it, in some ways they are related and as such address a common issue.
So I’m going to do my best to bring some light to the issues.

III. Let’s start with a little disambiguation.

- A. Disambiguation. Is that cool word or what?**
1. It’s a word that I don’t think I had ever seen before I started using Wikipedia.
 2. So in Wikipedia whenever there is a possible confusion or ambiguity in terms it offers you a link for “disambiguation,” removing the ambiguity and confusion from the issue.

B. So let's start our disambiguation by looking at what we mean by the word "immortal."

1. Immortal means that one does not die.
 - a) It is the understanding in some Christian circles that a person who has appropriately jumped through all the right hoops becomes immortal.
 - b) They don't really die but just move on into another world where they pretty much just continue to live on forever just as they did here.
2. Now what is ambiguous is that many people do not see or understand the distinction between immortal and eternal.
 - a) As I mentioned – immortal – refers to 'not dying' – but living on forever with conscious awareness of self and space and time.
'Living on forever' of course implies an infinite passage of time.
 - b) 'Eternal' however refers to a state outside or beyond space/time.
 - c) And really our resources aren't always very helpful in making this distinction.
 - d) For instance the song we sang this morning, "Shall We Gather at the River." Somebody grab a hymn book open it to

hymn 597.

Right above the number 597 what section of the hymn book does it tell you we are in?

We are in the section of hymns that deal with Eternal Life.

But what is described in the hymn is much more about immortality.

3. The difference between being immortal and having eternal life is really the difference between two different understandings of what may happen when we die.
And, both of these positions are represented in the Bible.
 - a) On one hand there are those who think that when we die, we don't really die but just move into a different world where we live on forever.
 - (1) Some of these people think we will have physical bodies that will be restored to us.
 - (2) Others think that we will have spiritual bodies, continuing on just like we are now -- but without our flesh.
 - b) But there are those who have a very different understanding of what happens when we die; these folks believe we enter eternal life.

But this would be something radically different from what we now know because it would be beyond space/time.

- (1) In eternal life, there is no gathering at a river.
- (2) There are no rivers, there are no things beyond space/time.
- (3) There's no living in mansions beyond space/time.
- (4) Without a very import dimension of our reality, namely,space/time; what does consciousness even mean?

4. Now, as I said, the Bible offers us visions of both.

- a) Certainly, we are given images of immortality or life everlasting.
- b) But we also hear,
"For God so loved the world, that God gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him, (that is, trusts Jesus) shall have --- what? Eternal Life."

C. And we may now want to return to that passage from the Gospel of Thomas and see if we have more insight --

Logion 42 "Come into being as you pass away."

D. To disambiguate this phrase, is it saying that as we pass away we come into **a** new being -- an immortal everlasting being?

Or, is it saying that as you pass away you come into **BEING** – capital “**B**”, that is Being it-self, a.k.a. God which is eternal and beyond space/time?

In which case as Paul says, “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”

E. Which brings us to the question about the nature of God, more simply as our original instant sermon question asked, “Is God nothing more than Nature?”

IV. So, we have done our disambiguation of immortal and eternal, but what does this have to do with the nature of God and is God just the same as nature.

Well, again in reference to God we must do the very same disambiguation.

A. Is God immortal or eternal?

1. Let's again pick up that hymn book again and turn to hymn #1.

2. What's the title and first line?
Immortal, Invisible God only wise.
3. And then if you are to look at hymn 573 you find the title, "Lead on Eternal Sovereign."
4. And so we see that once again our resources are not always helpful in trying to make sense of our faith.

B. The question before us is whether we believe that God is a being, which would make God "immortal" and still subject to space/time or Being it-self in which case God is eternal and not subject to, or beyond, space/time?

1. Even if we view God as all of nature, or as the entire universe, we define God as a being. And in such case there would be no difference between God and nature. God is just the whole of nature that is greater than the sum of all the parts.
2. The other option is that God is eternal, not subject to space/time, but is beyond space/time. In such a scenario, God is active in the moment to moment creation of space/time as we know it, but may also be active in many differing space/time environments.

C. I know this all sounds ethereal and to be honest, I can't tell you for sure what is the truth.

1. If God is immortal, then I'm guessing that our ultimate future may also lead to immortality.
2. If God is eternal, then it makes sense to me that our ultimate future is leading towards eternal life with God.
3. My best educated speculation comes down on the side of God as eternal, beyond nature and space/time.
4. This of course also means that I would come down on the side which places our ultimate future in the frame of eternal life rather than immortality.
5. But as I have said before, God is a mystery and I can't tell you for sure exactly what's comin' down the pike for us at the end of this gig.

V. Now here's the real kicker. Does it really matter?

A. Well, some folks think so.
They think that Jesus whole purpose on earth was to show us how to achieve immortality or eternal life.

1. It was all about our own individual salvation and figuring out the secrets or right actions or right beliefs that will get you into heaven.
2. That was the position of the ancient Gnostics, it's the position of a lot of Christians today.

3. For such folks, Jesus came to make my life better, my life immortal, my life eternal, my, my, my life more holy.
4. It's all about me and Jesus and my salvation.

B. Then there are those who think that all this worry about immortality and eternal life is all in vain, it is all vanity.

It is all selfish and narcissistic and that Jesus came not to teach us how to get to heaven, but how to bring heaven to earth.

1. Jesus came to teach us how to empty ourselves of self and to be compassionate and loving of others and in such a way show our love of God.
2. Jesus came and told us not to worry about immortality or eternal life – God's got that covered; whatever it is God's not gonna lose us. Rather, Jesus tells us we should focus on becoming slaves one to another.
3. To paraphrase Matthew 6 verse 34 – Don't worry about eternity, focus on how you can love one another today.

C. You can probably guess which camp I fall into, and which picture of Jesus I believe in and which Jesus I offer to you as Christ. And if not --- let me leave you with this -- Don't worry about tomorrow, much less all eternity, focus on how you can love one

**another and God today.
AMEN.**