

The following article presents beliefs and ideas for you to ponder, explore, and perhaps make your own.

Immortal Dad

I had never really thought about the obvious fact that a human body is mortal. It can break. It can be destroyed. Not one of us is an indestructible Superman!

It was eight o'clock on a Wednesday night: May 15, 2002. There were tubes and x-ray machines and ICU doctors but all the medical talent in Riverside couldn't keep my dad's life going for more than forty more minutes. When a 72-year-old man's body comes into brutal, unexpected contact with the business end of a hit-and-run pickup truck, the truck just gets a dent and the man goes to the morgue.



Photo: Dreamstime

Now, Dad was a minor celebrity, the bit actor "Waldo" in the acclaimed Our Gang comedy series. But that didn't make him immortal. He was a vibrant, born-again Christian, a missionary pastor with hundreds of baptisms to his credit. He had lots of prayer warriors who loved him. That didn't make him immortal either. At 8:40 that night, my father breathed his last, the green blips on the digital machinery went flat, and Jesus set to work building a heavenly mansion for Waldo.

My brothers and I stood by his bedside for those last holy moments, and I was so thankful that we all knew where to look in our Bibles. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 had the promise my bruised heart needed that night, and we read together in choked but hopeful voices: For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, and with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Christians have earnestly studied the Bible topic of death and resurrection ever since Christ Himself came out of the tomb. And I will concede that there are differences of opinion; some verses are hard to interpret and reconcile with all the other ones. But the inescapable, heartening reality is that death is not the end! I agree with every other Christian in the world that cemeteries are going to be broken open, morgues put out of business, ICU units shuttered. Those who die in Christ are going to live again. That is Fact #1.

As I write this, a couple named Mark and Cindy Hill just claimed half of a \$587.5 million Powerball prize. What does that feel like? Poverty and want will never again enter their lives! Things are going to be fairly nice for a while. But contrast that with the reality that will come shuddering home to every Christian as we see our Lord coming in the clouds. Never again will a disease or a killer's bullet or a speeding, out-of-control car be a threat. We will be forever

beyond the specter of death. Describing the Second Coming, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that in one transformative moment, all believers will put on immortality. No human being has that gift today; 1 Timothy 6:16 states flatly that only God has immortality. As fragile humans, we are all subject to death, from Adam down to the newest baby being born as you read these words. But not when the reality of Jesus' own resurrection is granted to those who love and follow Him.

Diligent Christians have struggled, though, with the question of an end-time resurrection of the saints. It's commonly believed in major churches that a saved person's immortal soul immediately goes to heaven at the moment of death. What, then, is the purpose of a glorious single-moment resurrection?

This is an admittedly challenging doctrine! However, as we study all the verses that address the matter of death and the makeup of a man or woman's "soul," a consistent pattern emerges. In the Adventist communion, we feel that the clearest path of understanding is to accept the Bible's plain statements regarding two issues. First, a human person is an indivisible unit: body, mind, "spirit." The Word of God says that Adam became a soul; we do not "have" souls. Not once does the Bible suggest that a conscious entity within us springs loose at the moment of death and can survive in a state of awareness outside the body, like in the Patrick Swayze movie *Ghost*. Secondly, death is consistently pictured as a sleep in both Testaments. King David called death a sleep; so did Peter and Paul . . . and even Jesus as He prepared to raise a dead little girl to life.

Two points bear consideration. To believe that departed spirits are all around us in a state of spiritual awareness is to leave oneself vulnerable to the possibility of demonic deception. The Bible has clear warnings about this very danger (1 Samuel 28); it's unfortunate that Christians even today are tempted to dabble with New Age fantasies about communicating with the dead.

Secondly, it's true that challenging verses can be interpreted as suggesting a saved person immediately goes to heaven at the moment of death. But there are logical answers which do justice to those thorny Bible passages — and in a way that preserves a coherent and hope-filled theology which preserves the glory and power of the final victory offered by the Resurrection of the saints. It wasn't until the eleven remaining disciples finally grasped the life-changing significance of Jesus' victory over death that they were transformed from timid, shallow, argumentative men into stalwart faith champions.