ENCOUNTER ON MARS HILL

The book of Acts records a remarkable encounter of Paul with the intelligentsia of Greece. He went to the Areopagus to share the gospel, and “around him gathered poets, artists, and philosophers—the scholars and sages of Athens.” (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 236.) Paul spoke to them of the Creator of heaven and earth, the brotherhood of all humanity, the futility of idolatry, the need to find the Unknown God, and the judgment to come (Acts 17:22–31). All listened attentively until Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. At that point some mocked, and others said, “‘We will hear you again on this matter’” (Acts 17:32, NKJV). Paul’s reasoning was not fruitless, because “some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (Acts 17:34).

Why did many of the luminaries of Athens mock Paul? The answer is that the apostle believed in the resurrection of the body, while the philosophers believed in the immortality of the soul. The Greek philosophers who mocked could not understand how anyone in his right mind would want to have a material body after death. While Paul’s worldview spoke of a longing for the redemption of the body from the relentless ravages of time and matter in a sinful world, the philosophers on Mars Hill longed for their immortal souls to escape the relentless cycle of time and space. Is it just possible that the Christian world has embraced the theology of Socrates and not of Jesus?
Read Genesis 1 from the translation of your choice. Write out Genesis 1:26–31. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
MATTER AND TIME

The Bible tells us that God created time. He created the day, week, month, and year (Gen. 1:14, 31; 2:2, 3). God also created matter from which He formed the earth, the vegetation, the birds, the fish, the land animals, and the bodies of man and woman. When creation week ended, God declared that everything He had made was very good (Gen. 1:31). However, God placed a tree in the Garden and told the man that if he ate its fruit he would die (Gen. 2:9). With the inception of sin, in the passing of time, matter decayed, and the decay not only affected man but also the entire creation (Rom. 8:19–24). The decaying of matter with the passing of time is a post-sin phenomenon. Decay and death of material substance does not occur because time and matter are evil but rather because of sin (Rom. 5:12; 6:23).

The second law of thermodynamics and simple observation reveal an undeniable fact: in the passing of time, matter deteriorates. As time passes, the body wrinkles, gets old and sick, and eventually dies and decomposes. This was not God’s original plan—it is the direct and inevitable result of sin acting upon matter. So, the solution is not to get rid of time and matter but rather to get rid of sin!

The Bible does not depreciate the material body. In fact, it teaches that Jesus, the very substance of God, took upon Himself a real material body of human flesh (John 1:14; Rom. 8:3). Even the glorified resurrection body of Jesus was composed of real hands, feet, flesh, and bones (Luke 24:39). So serious was the coming of Jesus in the flesh that whoever taught the contrary had the spirit of the antichrist (1 John 4:3).

The Greek philosophers such as Plato and Socrates could conceive of great humans becoming gods after discarding the body and time. The idea of God taking on human flesh and dying on the cross, however, was not only scandalous but foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23). Who in their right mind would want to take on human flesh? To the Greeks and Romans, the ideal was for the soul to leave the body and thus escape the limitations of time and matter.

With the “immortality of the soul” mental block, the Greek philosophers found it virtually impossible to believe in the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body. For the philosophers, the great hope was not the redemption of the body but deliverance of the soul from the prison of the body. On the other hand, the Bible concept is the redemption of the body and all creation from the curse of sin to incorruption and immortality (Rom. 8:23; 1 Cor. 15:50–55; Phil. 3:20, 21).

The Bible teaches that there will be matter and time in the earth made new, so time and matter in themselves are not evil. There will be days, weeks, and months there (Rev. 22:1, 2; Isa. 66:22, 23). Because there will be no sin, however, matter will not decay over time.
FRIEND OR DEADLY ENEMY?

Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato had no special revelation from God, but they were keen observers. They saw that with the passing of time, matter decays. They also saw that the material body displays the basest of evil passions. They concluded, therefore, that the body and time are inherently evil, and their goal was to dispose of the material body to escape the limitations of time and space. Thus they could get rid of their evil passions and the inevitable consequences of matter and time.

The Greek and Roman thinkers believed that humanity is composed of two separable entities—the corruptible, mortal, material body with all its vices, and the pure, immaterial soul that resided within the body. William Barclay wrote, “The evil of the body became one of the dominant ideas of Greek thought: Soma Sema, the body is a tomb, ran the Orphic jingle. . . . Epictetus can say that he is ashamed to have a body, that he is a ‘poor soul shackled to a corpse’. . . . Seneca speaks of ‘the detestable habitation’ of the body, and vain flesh in which the soul is imprisoned. . . . ‘Disdain the flesh,’ says Marcus Aurelius, ‘blood and bones and network, a twisted skein of nerves, veins, arteries” (Flesh and Spirit: An Examination of Galatians 5:19–23 [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 10, 11). Plato concluded that “no man can be a lover of wisdom and a lover of the body” (Barclay, Flesh and Spirit, 11). Socrates wrote that “the soul is contaminated by the body. If we are ever to know anything we must be freed from the body. The body is the fetter of the soul” (Barclay, Flesh and Spirit, 11). Philo of Alexandria exclaimed, “The body is a prison and a corpse” (Barclay, Flesh and Spirit, 11).

Reformed scholar Oscar Cullmann wrote a treatise in which he drew a sharp contrast between how Jesus and the Greek philosopher Socrates viewed death (Oscar Cullmann, Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? [London: Epworth, 1958], 19–27). When Jesus gathered with His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, He faced death with trepidation, looking at it as a deadly enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). He shuddered in fear as He sweated great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). On the other hand, Socrates considered death a friend and encouraged his disciples to drink the hemlock in order to deliver their souls from the chains of the body and thus experience true freedom. The apostle Paul did not believe in death as the emancipation of the soul from the body but rather as the moment when “the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). He knew “that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs . . . eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:22, 23).
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Romans 8:19–24
Luke 24:36–43
Philippians 3:20, 21
John 1:14
John 2:19–21
1 Corinthians 15:42–49

What other parables come to mind in connection with Genesis 1?

Review your memorized verse from Genesis 1.
THE IMPLICATIONS OF IMMORTALITY

Belief in the immortality of the soul has several devastating implications that impact our relationship with Christ. First, the immortality of the soul doctrine glorifies the creature rather than the Creator (Rev. 14:7), who alone has immortality (1 Tim. 6:15, 16). Immortality, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence belong exclusively to Deity. Furthermore, if the soul of man is immortal by nature, why would Jesus have to live and die to give us what we already possess (1 Cor. 15:3)? The doctrine of the immortality of the soul smears God and makes Him a liar (Gen. 2:16, 17) and Satan a truth teller (Gen. 3:4). God said, “You will surely die.” Satan said, “You will not surely die.”

If our soul is what really matters, why would it be necessary to care for what we are going to discard at death anyway? The Bible teaches that we are to care for the physical body because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19, 20; Rom. 12:1) and the health of our spiritual nature depends to a great degree on the condition of our physical nature. “The body is the only medium through which the mind and the soul are developed for the upbuilding of character. Hence, it is that the adversary of souls directs his temptations to the enfeebling and degrading of the physical powers. His success here means the surrender to evil of the whole being. The tendencies of our physical nature, unless under the dominion of a higher power, will surely work ruin and death” (Ellen G. White, Counsels on Diet and Foods [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938], 73).

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul leads many to lose a sense of urgency and expectancy for the second coming of Jesus. If our soul goes to heaven to be with Jesus at death, why should we be so excited about being with Him at His second coming (1 Thess. 4:15–17)?

Finally, the doctrine of the immortality of the soul opens wide the door of the church to the manifestations of spiritualism. If souls go to heaven at death, what would prevent them from coming back to earth to communicate with the living? We have been warned: “The last great delusion is soon to open before us. Antichrist is to perform his marvelous works in our sight. So closely will the counterfeit resemble the true that it will be impossible to distinguish between them except by the Holy Scriptures. By their testimony every statement and every miracle must be tested” (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 593).
A CONVERSATION WITH MOTHER

One day I listened to a conversation between my mother and a sister, in reference to a discourse which they had recently heard, to the effect that the soul had not natural immortality. Some of the minister's proof texts were repeated. Among them I remember these impressed me very forcibly: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Ezekiel 18:4. “The living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything.” Ecclesiastes 9:5. “Which in His times He shall show, who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality.” 1 Timothy 6:15, 16. “To them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.” Romans 2:7.

“Why,” said my mother, after quoting the foregoing passage, “should they seek for what they already have?”

I listened to these new ideas with an intense and painful interest. When alone with my mother, I inquired if she really believed that the soul was not immortal. Her reply was, that she feared we had been in error on that subject, as well as upon some others.

“But, mother,” said I, “do you really believe that the soul sleeps in the grave until the resurrection? Do you think that the Christian, when he dies, does not go immediately to heaven, nor the sinner to hell?”

She answered: “The Bible gives us no proof that there is an eternally burning hell. If there is such a place, it should be mentioned in the Sacred Book.”

“What, mother!” cried I, in astonishment, “this is strange talk for you! If you believe this strange theory, do not let anyone know of it; for I fear that sinners would gather security from this belief, and never desire to seek the Lord.”

“If this is sound Bible truth,” she replied, “instead of preventing the salvation of sinners, it will be the means of winning them to Christ. If the love of God will not induce the rebel to yield, the terrors of an eternal hell will not drive him to repentance. Besides, it does not seem a proper way to win souls to Jesus by appealing to one of the lowest attributes of the mind,—abject fear. The love of Jesus attracts; it will subdue the hardest heart.”

It was some months after this conversation before I heard anything further concerning this doctrine; but during this time my mind had been much exercised upon the subject. When I heard it preached, I believed it to be the truth. From the time that light in regard to the sleep of the dead dawned upon my mind, the mystery that had enshrouded the resurrection vanished, and the great event itself assumed a new and sublime importance. My mind had often been disturbed by its efforts to reconcile the immediate reward or punishment of the dead with the undoubted fact of a future resurrection and judgment. If at death the soul entered upon eternal happiness or misery, where was the need of a resurrection of the poor moldering body?

But this new and beautiful faith taught me the reason why inspired writers had dwelt so much upon the resurrection of the body; it was because the entire being was slumbering in the grave. I could now clearly perceive the fallacy of our former position on this question. (Ellen G. White, Christian Experience and Teachings of Ellen G. White [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1922], 39–41.)
InInQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How has Greek philosophy influenced Christianity?

What evidences do we find in the creation story of Genesis 1 that time and matter are good?

How did sin affect the entirety of creation, including time and matter?

What doctrine of the Bible was the bone of contention between Paul and the philosophers of Mars Hill? Why? (See Acts 17:18, 32.)

How did the incarnation of Jesus reveal that the material body and time are not evil in themselves?

How is spiritualism playing an important role today in gathering the world for the final battle against God and His people?

How can the desires of sinful flesh be overcome in this life?

What serious theological implications flow from the doctrine of the immortality of the soul?

Socrates or Jesus?