

Some Answered Questions, The Immortality of the Spirit (1)

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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The Immortality of the Spirit (1)

Having established the existence of the human spirit, we must now establish its immortality.

In the heavenly Books, mention is made of the immortality of the spirit, which is the very foundation of the divine religions. For rewards and punishments are said to be of two kinds—one being existential rewards and punishments and the other, ultimate rewards and punishments. Existential paradise and hell are to be found in all the worlds of God, whether in this world or in the heavenly realms of the spirit, and to gain these rewards is to attain life eternal. That is why Christ said: Act in such a manner that you may find eternal life, be born of water and of the spirit, and thus enter into the Kingdom.

Existential rewards consist in the virtues and perfections that adorn the human reality. For example, man was immersed in darkness and becomes luminous; he was ignorant and becomes informed; he was heedless and becomes aware; he was asleep and is awakened; he was dead and is quickened to life; he was blind and begins to see; he was deaf and begins to hear; he was earthly and becomes heavenly; he was material and becomes spiritual. Through these rewards he is reborn in spirit, is created anew, and becomes the manifestation of the verse in the Gospel that says that the Apostles “were born, not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”—that is, they were delivered from the animal characteristics and qualities that are inherent to human nature, and acquired divine attributes, which are the outpouring grace of God. This is the true meaning of being born again. For such souls, there is no greater torment than to be veiled from God, and no worse punishment than selfish qualities, evil attributes, baseness of character, and engrossment in carnal desires. When these souls are delivered from the darkness of these vices through the light of faith, when they are illumined by the rays of the Sun of Truth and endowed with every human virtue, they reckon this as the greatest reward and regard it as the true paradise. In like manner, they consider spiritual punishment—that is, existential torment and chastisement—to consist in subjection to the world of nature; in being veiled from God; in ignorance and unawareness; in engrossment with covetous desires; in absorption in animal vices; in being marked by evil attributes, such as falsehood, tyranny, and iniquity; in attachment to worldly things; and in immersion in satanic fancies—all of which they reckon to be the greatest of torments and punishments.

The ultimate rewards, which consist in life everlasting, have been explicitly recorded in all the heavenly Scriptures. They are divine perfections, eternal bounty, and everlasting joy. The



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ultimate rewards are the gifts and perfections that man attains in the spiritual realms after his ascension from this world, while the existential rewards are those true and luminous perfections which are attained while still abiding in this world, and which are the cause of everlasting life. For the existential rewards are the advancement of existence itself and are analogous to the passage of man from the stage of the embryo to that of maturity and becoming the embodiment of the verse, "Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!" The ultimate rewards consist in spiritual bounties and bestowals, such as the manifold gifts of God that are vouchsafed after the ascension of the soul, the attainment of the heart's desire, and reunion with Him in the everlasting realm. Similarly, ultimate retributions and punishments consist in being deprived of the special bounties and unfailing bestowals of God and sinking to the lowest degrees of existence. And whoso is deprived of these favours, though he continue to exist after death, is accounted as dead in the eyes of the people of truth.

A rational proof for the immortality of the spirit is this, that no effect can be produced by a non-existent thing; that is, it is impossible that any effect should appear from absolute nothingness. For the effect of a thing is secondary to its existence, and that which is secondary is conditioned upon the existence of that which is primary. So from a non-existent sun no rays can shine; from a non-existent sea no waves can surge; from a non-existent cloud no rain can fall; from a non-existent tree no fruit can appear; from a non-existent man nothing can be manifested or produced. Therefore, so long as the effects of existence are visible, they prove that the author of that effect exists.

Consider how, to this day, the sovereignty of Christ has endured. How can a sovereignty of such greatness be manifested by a non-existent sovereign? How can such waves surge from a non-existent sea? How can such heavenly breezes waft from a non-existent garden? Consider that as soon as the constituent parts of anything, be it mineral, plant, or animal, are disintegrated and its elemental composition is dissolved, all effect, influence, and trace thereof vanish. But it is not so with the human spirit and reality, which continues to manifest its signs, to exert its influence, and to sustain its effects even after the dissociation and decomposition of the various parts and members of the body.

This question is very subtle: Consider it attentively. This is a rational proof that we are providing, that rational minds may weigh it in the balance of reason and fair-mindedness. But if the human spirit be rejoiced and attracted to the Kingdom, if the inner eye be opened and the spiritual ear attuned, and if spiritual feelings come to predominate, the immortality of the spirit will be seen as clearly as the sun, and heavenly tidings and intimations will encompass that spirit.

Tomorrow we will give other proofs.