

What is soul sleep?

<https://carm.org/soul-sleep>

by Matt Slick

Soul sleep is the teaching that when a person dies, his soul "sleeps" until the time of the future resurrection. In this condition, the person is not aware or conscious. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh-day Adventists hold to this doctrine. But the Jehovah's Witnesses teach annihilation. This means that after death a person ceases to exist. At the future resurrection they maintain that the soul is made again. Basically, it is a re-creation of the individual. The Seventh-day Adventists teach that the soul is simply inert and resides in the memory of God.

The primary verses used to support soul sleep are found in Ecclesiastes:

Eccl. 9:5, "For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten."

Eccl. 12:7, "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."

Ecclesiastes must be understood in the context of its own commentary, which says at the opening of the book, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity." 3 What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?" (Eccl. 1:1-3). The writer is telling us how things are from the human perspective, from "under the sun." He is not telling us doctrinal statements about whether or not the soul continues after death. Besides, it's a mistake to use the Old Testament to interpret the New Testament. It is the New Testament that sheds light on the Old Testament.

In the New Testament we see Paul say in 2 Cor. 5:8, "we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." Paul is clearly telling us that when he dies, he will go and be with the Lord. Furthermore, at the Transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-8) we see Moses and Elijah who were alive. There was no soul sleep with them.

Therefore, the doctrine of soul sleep is incorrect. The soul continues on after death. The wicked face the judgment of God, and the Christians will dwell in His presence.

Both groups are in error about soul sleep.