

Settling the Soul Sleep Controversy

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By David J. Stewart

"And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God... And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." —Acts 7:56,59

There is no controversy if you believe the Bible. Soul Sleep refers to the idea that when we die, our souls "fall asleep" and become totally unconscious. Conversely, the Bible teaches that believers who die immediately go to be with the Lord. Certain false religions; such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists errantly teach that Christians are not conscious after death, and that their soul remains at rest in the grave until a future resurrection; however, there are numerous Scriptures which thwart such speculation.

Consider the powerful evidence in Acts 7:54-59 concerning the murder of Stephen... "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord. And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Now do you really think that the Apostle Stephen, who was literally being stoned to death for preaching the Gospel [who is seeing the heaven's opened right before his very eyes and the Lord standing on the right hand of the Father]... do you really think that Stephen just went into unconsciousness in the grave? Of course not! Stephen went to Heaven to be with the Lord.

There are many such Scriptures which evidence that believers who die now are conscious in Heaven...

Ephesians 3:14 and 15 states, "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." There's a family in Heaven and earth, i.e., some are alive in Heaven and others are still in the flesh on earth. This is irrefutable evidence against the heresy of soul sleep. Departed saints compose the "family in Heaven."

In Luke 15:10 we read, "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." The Bible doesn't say that the angels rejoice, although I'm certain they do. It says that there's rejoicing "in the presence of the angels." I believe this refers to Christians already in Heaven, i.e., the family in Heaven.

In Genesis 5:24 we are told, "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." Clearly, God took Enoch to Heaven to share in sweet fellowship with his friend.

In 2nd Kings 2:11 we read, "And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Elijah was taken up into Heaven the Bible says. Elijah did not cease to be conscious.

Matthew 17:1-4 reads, "And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias." Moses had been dead (Deuteronomy 34:5) for fifteen centuries; yet, despite being dead, he is able to speak to Jesus. Clearly, Moses' soul was not asleep in the grave. The same is true of Elijah, who centuries earlier had been caught up in a whirlwind (2nd Kings 2:11). Elijah was still conscious.

The Bible tells us in Luke 16:22 that Lazarus was "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." Clearly this was not soul sleep as some false cults and prophets teach. Only a fool would claim that Jesus was telling a parable that isn't true in Luke 16:19-31. If it were merely a parable, then the Lord would be guilty of raising false hopes and misleading us concerning what occurs after death. In John 14:2 Jesus plainly stated, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus said what He meant, and meant what He said. If Jesus taught that Lazarus (a literal name) was carried by angels to his heavenly abode, then you can rest assured that we can expect the same. Amen!

1st Thessalonians 4:14 tells us, "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him." When Jesus returns at the Rapture, the Bible teaches that God will bring those who "sleep in Jesus" WITH HIM. Amen! The only way for God to bring those saints WITH HIM means that they were already WITH HIM in Heaven. Those who die in the Lord are asleep in Jesus, but their soul and spirit are in Heaven with the Lord.

Philippians 3:20 says, "For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." The Greek word for "conversation" means "CITIZENSHIP, A COMMUNITY." Thus, every believer is already a citizen of our Heavenly home. There is a community in Heaven where we are being expected. When we die, there will be a heavenly family awaiting and welcoming us.

Revelation 20:13 states, "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." Carefully notice that the Bible differentiates between "death" and "hell" here. If soul sleep were true, then there would be no dead coming from hell, only from death. The fact that God differentiates between the sea, death and hell, I think is further solid evidence that soul sleep is not a Biblical teaching. We read clearly that some of the dead came from hell.

Matthew 22:32 states, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." God is not the God of the DEAD; but of the LIVING.

2nd Corinthians 5:8, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." Paul said to be absent from the body means to be PRESENT WITH THE LORD. If our soul is unconscious when our body dies, then how can we be "absent" from the body? The Bible teaches that we will be with the Lord while absent from our body. Clearly, the Word of God teaches that the soul separates from the body at death. Amen!

In Luke 23:43 Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross... "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Jesus didn't say anything about soul sleep.

Some people believe that dead believers today are unconscious and will remain so until they are raised up again at the Rapture; but I think all of the Scriptures I just quoted overwhelmingly evidence that believers are still conscious after death and go to Heaven to be with the Lord.

What about the wicked?

False cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses deny that unbelievers go Hell. They define "hell" as merely the grave. Mormons also teach this heresy. Psalm 9:17 quickly silences such speculation as unbiblical rubbish... "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God." Psalm 9:17 would make absolutely no sense at all if hell is merely "the grave." Why would the Bible warn that the wicked and the righteous go to the SAME place? Clearly, the Bible is warning that the wicked and those who forget God will be PUNISHED in Hellfire.

Arnold Murray is a false prophet in Arkansas, who teaches that unbelievers don't go to Hell; but rather, are annihilated. This is unscriptural. Many such false prophets lurk within America's churches today.

2nd Thessalonians 1:8-9 warns, "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." Mark 3:29 sternly warns, "But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation." The Greek word for "blaspheme" means "to vilify; specially, to speak

impiously (lacking due respect for God)." Romans 1:21,22 proclaim... "Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." These people refuse to acknowledge God in their lives. They are unthankful. Their minds are filled with silly and empty thoughts of sarcasm against God. Their foolish hearts grow darker and darker every day. The world is filled with such Christ-rejecters today, who continually place God on trial and challenge His goodness and divine sovereignty. For example, The Rational Response Squad.

Thus, anyone who rejects Jesus Christ as their personal Savior will be punished in flaming fire (2nd Thessalonians 1:8). It is a matter of obeying God, i.e., obeying the Gospel (the good news of Christ's redeeming work by which we can be wholly forgiven and have everlasting life). Thankfully, all that God requires of us is that we acknowledge our guilt of sin and believe on Jesus as the Christ... "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins."

Jude 1:7 reads, "Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."

The Bible teaches that the wicked are presently suffering, and thus are NOT unconscious.

Feeble Arguments

One of the Scriptures used by proponents of the Soul Sleep heresy is Ecclesiastes 9:5, which states, "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten." However, the context shows that this verse is not speaking about soul sleep at all, just as "they have no more reward" is not denying the resurrection of the dead. As evidence that Solomon (i.e., the author of Ecclesiastes) did NOT believe in soul sleep, one can cite Ecclesiastes 12:7 from the same Book... "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return to God who gave it." That is, the soul has an existence independent of the body, and returns to God at death. This clearly shows that soul sleep is unbiblical.

Probably the strongest argument which proponents of soul sleep use is Daniel 12:2 and 13, "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt ... But go thou thy way till the end be: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days." Admittedly, these Scriptures taken by themselves would seem to evidence that soul sleep is Biblical. However, the only correct way to interpret the Word of God is by comparing Scripture with Scripture. In order to "rightly divide the Word of truth" we must also take into consideration 1st Thessalonians 4:14-16...

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first."

The key word is "asleep" which simply means "dead" in the Greek. Thus, the believers spirit and body are separated at the time of physical death. Many people are as confused about the word "sleep" in the Old Testament as Jesus' disciples were about Lazarus' death...

"These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead" (John 11:11-14).

In the case of Lazarus, "sleep" simply meant physical death. Jesus disciples misunderstood what "sleep" meant. Thus is the case with those today who claim that believers who die are asleep spiritually in the grave. Daniel 12:2 and 13 speak of physical death, and of the future resurrection of the dead bodily from the grave, when the spirit will be united with the body and then the judgment.

Does Daniel 12:2 Only Speak of a Jewish National Resurrection?

I disagree with Oliver B. Greene's interpretation of Daniel 12:2, i.e., that this is a resurrection of the NATION of Israel from amongst dead nations (Daniel, by Oliver B. Greene; pg. 464, copyright 1964). Certainly, there will be a national resurrection of Israel, i.e., a restoration of every saved Jew to the Promised Land; but this has nothing to do with Daniel 12:2 in my humble opinion. Dr. Greene believes that the resurrection spoken of in Daniel 12:2 is neither physical nor spiritual; but rather, a restoration of the Jews to their homeland in Palestine. The problem I have with that is the phrase, "them that sleep in the dust." Clearly, the Bible is speaking about the DEAD in the earth, i.e., the dust of the earth. It is clear to me that Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future bodily resurrection.

I do agree with Dr. Greene that the Bible nowhere teaches a "general resurrection" as seems to be indicated here in Daniel 12:2. Revelation 20:6 speaks of the FIRST resurrection and Revelation 20:5 of the SECOND (see also Revelation 20:11-15 concerning the SECOND resurrection and death). The saved and unsaved will NOT stand in the same judgment. Thus, I think that Daniel 12:2 speaks in a broader sense of future judgments, and not to any one particular judgment or resurrection. Revelation chapter 20 is evidence of this.

Daniel 12:2 speaks concerning those who are dead physically. Revelation chapter 20 clearly teaches that there will be TWO bodily resurrections and TWO judgments. The FIRST resurrection will be at the Rapture for all believers (1st Thessalonians 4:14-16; 1st Corinthians 15:51-54). At this time the Judgment Seat of Christ for all believers will take place (2nd Corinthians 5:10).

The SECOND resurrection will be after the 1,000 year Millennial Period, and the wicked shall be tried and sentenced to the Lake of Fire forever (Revelation 20:11-15). The judgment for believers will be a civil court, where each believer will give account to God for their life (Romans 14:12; 1st Thessalonians 4:6). However, the Great White Throne of Judgment for unbelievers will be a criminal court, and they will be tried as such. The believer is "safe" in the blood of Christ Jesus, and there is no condemnation.

Conclusion

It is important that any honest student of the Bible take into consideration the entire scope of Scriptures, and not just base a doctrine on one or two Scriptures. Overall, the Bible teaches that there is consciousness in the afterlife and that every soul goes to either Heaven or Hell. How will you spend eternity, smoking or non-smoking?

When one considers that Stephen saw the heavens opening to receive him as he was being martyred (Acts 7:54-59), it is only reasonable to conclude that he went to be with the Lord. We see in the Scriptures that Moses and Elijah were present, speaking with the Lord in Matthew 17:1-4. We read in the Scriptures about "the whole family in heaven" (Ephesians 3:14,15) and that we are citizens of Heaven (Philippians 3:20). And again in Luke 16:22 we are told that Lazarus was "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." Ecclesiastes 12:7 plainly states, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." Biblically, the soul separates from the body at death and returns to God, our Creator. 2nd Corinthians 5:8 plainly speaks of one's spirit being "absent from the body"... "to be present with the Lord."

I hope this brief Bible study helps a bit. I am convinced that believers who pass into eternity from this earthly life have no break in consciousness, and are immediately carried by the angels to Heaven to be with the Lord.

"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." —2nd Corinthians 5:8