

“Is Soul Sleep Biblical?”

I am writing to seek clarification on the rather thorny issue of life after death. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 Paul outlines how the process of judgment will take place. He says, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a loud cry of summons, with the shout of an archangel, and with the blast of the trumpet of God. And those who have departed this life in Christ will rise first.” Isn’t this a substantive indication of “soul sleep”? If what Paul asserts is anything to go by it means that after death the soul remains in somewhat a “holding cell” until the day of judgment regardless of the person’s beliefs and tenets prior to death. An appendage would be 1 Samuel 28:1-14; I believe this passage also corroborates the “holding cell” school of thought.

Thanks for your letter. This is a very important issue. I am personally persuaded that the doctrine of “soul sleep” is incorrect. When the Bible speaks of death in terms of “sleep,” it is speaking this way because the person’s body looks as if it were asleep. In other words, this way of speaking has to do with the body, and not the soul.

This is evident, I think, when one considers a passage like Luke 16:19-31. Both the rich man and Lazarus die, but their souls are very far from being “asleep” (in the sense of unconscious). The men in this story, although physically dead, are pictured as consciously awake and aware of their surroundings. Their bodies have died, but their souls are very much conscious in the afterlife.

This is also evident in Revelation 6:9-11. And it is further supported by the teaching (concerning believers) that when we die, we go immediately to be with the Lord. Here, remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Today, you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Or consider Paul’s statements in passages like 2 Cor. 5:1-10 or Philippians 1:23.

All of these passages indicate, I think, that believers are conscious and with the Lord in paradise between death and resurrection. Unbelievers, likewise, are also conscious (though they are in torment and separated from the Lord).

Hence, the Bible seems to teach that we continue to experience some form of personal, conscious existence between death and resurrection.

I hope that these passages from Scripture will help to clear up this issue for you.

Shalom in Christ,

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