

Ask Hank: JAH364

IS SOUL SLEEP BIBLICAL?

by Hank Hanegraaff

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“Death is not complete annihilation; it is only a state of temporary unconsciousness while the person awaits the resurrection. The Bible repeatedly calls this intermediate state a sleep....The soul has no conscious existence apart from the body, and no Scripture indicates that at death the soul survives as a conscious entity.”

—Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists ¹

Seventh-day Adventists are well known for promoting the idea of soul sleep. From their perspective, the soul of a man is indistinguishable from the whole of a man. Thus, the soul of man cannot continue to exist consciously apart from the body.² In making their case they lean heavily upon the book of Ecclesiastes—especially the words, “The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing” (9:5³). Such passages, however, must be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture, especially the New Testament. The magnifying glass through which we read the Law and the Prophets must ever remain in the hands of the New Testament writers.

First, as the Bible makes clear, the soul is not the whole of a human being. The New Testament unambiguously communicates that the soul continues to have awareness though the body has died. As previously noted, in Luke 16, Jesus tells the parable of a rich man and a beggar who die physically yet experience conscious awareness in the intermediate state—a fact difficult to deny in that the rich man’s brothers are living and final judgment has not yet occurred. Not only so, but the Bible’s use of the word *hades*, without exception, refers to the transitional rather than the eternal state. Likewise, while being stoned in Acts 7, “Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was there giving approval to his death” (Acts 7:59–8:1). It is clear that while the body of Stephen died, the nonphysical aspect of his humanity continued to exist.

Furthermore, as is obvious from the account of Stephen, sleep is a common biblical

metaphor for death of the body—in distinction from the soul. John 11 provides the clearest of examples. Here Jesus tells his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep but I am going there to wake him up.’ His disciples replied, ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead’” (vv. 11–14). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul says, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (vv. 51–54). Here, as in myriad other examples,⁴ the Bible speaks of the body asleep in death. Conversely, the Bible never speaks of the soul asleep in death.

Finally, if the soul did not continue in conscious awareness after the death of the body, it would be incongruent for the apostle Paul to desire to be away from the body in order to be at home with the Lord. Says Paul, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Phil. 1:21–24). How could death be “better by far” than further fruitful ministry if it entails soul sleep? Paul iterates the same sentiment in a clarion call to the Corinthians: “We are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:6–10).

The point here, as elsewhere in the biblical text,⁵ is that far from soul sleep, to be with Christ is soul satisfaction. While Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 is adduced to the contrary, Solomon does not conclude that “the dead know nothing” under the Son, but the dead know nothing “under the sun.” When we die, “the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7).

In short, soul sleep has nothing to commend it biblically. As the Bible makes clear, the soul continues to have consciousness apart from the body; sleep is a biblical metaphor for physical death; and conscious existence in the presence of the Lord during the intermediate state is something we may look forward to with eager anticipation.⁶—*Hank Hanegraaff*

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NOTES

- 1 *Seventh-Day Adventists Believe ...A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists, 2005), 390–91.
- 2 See *Ibid.*, 94–95, 390–91.
- 3 Scripture quotations are from the NIV1984.
- 4 E.g., 1 Kings 2:10, 11:43; Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2; 1 Cor. 15:18, 20; Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 4:13–15.
- 5 See Heb. 12:23; Luke 23:42–43; especially Luke 23:46 in comparison with 24:37–39 and Acts 7:59; cf. 2 Cor. 12:1–4.
- 6 Adapted from Hank Hanegraaff, *AfterLife: What You Need to Know about Heaven, the Hereafter, and Near Death Experiences* (Worthy Publishing, 2013), 80–82.