

Soul Sleep
Wednesday Online Bible Study
6/3/20

Introduction:

- Philippians 1:21-24 – ²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.
- We will focus on verse 23 where Paul says “My desire is to depart and be with Christ...”
- This verse combats a false doctrine called “Soul Sleep” taught by Jehovah’s Witnesses and 7th Day Adventists.

What is Soul Sleep?

- The official doctrine is named “Conditional Immortality.”
- The soul dies with the body, therefore there is no conscious afterlife until the resurrection of the dead in the end times.
- Once the body is resurrected from the dead, the person will be conscious again.
- Both Jehovah’s Witnesses and 7th Day Adventists teach that the wicked will be annihilated after the final judgment. They will not be conscious forever in hell because the body will be dead.
- So those who believe in Soul Sleep often reject hell as a place of eternal, conscious torment.

Their Defense of Soul Sleep:

- Ecclesiastes 9:10 – Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.
 - They argue that this verse very clearly says that in Sheol (the grave), no one has thoughts. Therefore no one is conscious.
 - But Ecclesiastes should be read carefully and not isolated from its context. Ecclesiastes often gives satirical reasoning to show the absurdity of living a life on earth without God. This verse gives the secular “You only live once” mentality, so make the most of it, because once your dead, your dead. When you are dead, you can’t do anything more on earth.
 - Another example of this satire is from Ecclesiastes 2:12-17. The writer says it is no better to be wise than a fool because “What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?” Death comes to the wise and the foolish. This verse is not encouraging us to believe that being a fool is fine because the wise and the foolish die. It is satire. It is purposefully showing how meaningless life would be without believing in God. But the writer doesn’t actually mean that it doesn’t matter to be wise or foolish. He ends the book telling his readers to “Fear God.”
 - We must be careful not to form full-blown doctrines from sayings in Ecclesiastes.
- 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 – ⁵¹Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.
 - They argue that verses that refer to death as sleep mean that the soul is sleeping, it is not conscious when one dies.
 - But Jesus and Paul referring to death as sleep does not have to mean that the soul is unconscious. Referring to death as sleep can speak to the fact that physical death is not final—bodies will be awakened, resurrected.
- Luke 23:43 – ⁴³And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

- The original text does not have commas. They argue that it should read as “Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise.” This means that the promise of paradise was not for it to begin today for the thief on the cross, but rather Jesus is simply saying that he will say something true to him today.
- But no other times in the Gospels does Jesus use the word “today” to refer to the timing of his statement “truly I say to you.”
- One thing that soul sleep advocates can be commended for is the attempt to keep body and soul together as what constitutes a person. Some Christians today over-emphasize the soul/spirit over the body and forget that the body should be respected, such as the woman going Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus at his tomb. God created the body and soul to be together in the Garden of Eden. The New Earth will have body and soul together. The point of disagreement is what death does to the person until the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world.

Verses Against Soul Sleep:

- The thief on the cross was already mentioned.
- Philippians 1:23 – I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

Paul assumes that when he dies, he will be with Jesus.

- 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 – ⁶So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.

Once again Paul assumes that if the Christian is away from the body, he is present with the Lord, not unconscious.

- Mark 12:26-27 – ²⁶And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? ²⁷He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.”

Jesus quotes from Exodus to make the point that when God introduced himself to Moses, he said “I am the God of Abraham” not “I was the God of Abraham”, therefore he is the God of the living (who are even dead). It implies in some way the patriarchs were still living—which would be that their souls are still alive while they await the resurrection.

- Luke 16:19-21 – The Rich Man and Lazarus

Jesus tells of a rich man and Lazarus who both died and both were conscious after death. Even if this story was a parable, all of Jesus’ parables could have happened. They were always told within the reality of his audience. It would be odd for Jesus to tell this story if it actually were not possible.

Conclusion:

- Virtually all Christians reject the doctrine of soul sleep.
- Paul was eager to leave the persecutions of this earth to be with Jesus. He was not eager to be unconscious.