

## Explanation of the Doctrine of Soul Sleep

Soul Sleep is the erroneous teaching that when a person dies, the soul literally sleeps until the time of the bodily resurrection when it is awakened. During this time the person is not conscious, and has no awareness of their condition or state. Some adherents believe that the person is in a dream-like state.

Seventh-Day Adventists, for example, boldly assert:

**“Death is an unconscious state (a ‘sleep’):** At death, all consciousness ends. The dead person does not know anything and does not do anything (Eccl. 9:5, 6, 10). Jesus and the apostles (as well as writers in the Old Testament) frequently referred to death as sleep (e.g., Matt. 9:24; Mark 5:39; John 11:11-14; 1 Cor. 15:51, 52; 1 Thess. 4:13-17; 2 Peter 3:4; Dan. 12:2; Job 14:10-12; Ps. 13:3). The image of sleep emphasizes that death is not the end, but is rather an unconscious state prior to the resurrection (note in this regard the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:11-14, 23-25, 43).” (www.adventist.org)

Jehovah’s Witness teach a variation of this doctrine, but insist that the dead lie in a state of death (not unconscious sleep) until made alive in the resurrection (not just awakened).

Both groups and others who accept this teaching commit a grave error (pun intended) – they rob themselves and others of the comfort God has provided for us when one of our loved one dies.

The Bible warns us about religious leaders who *“bring in damnable heresis, even denying the Lord that brought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.”* (2 Peter 2:1).

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Scriptures to say something they do not say.

**2 Peter 3:16** *“As also in all his [Paul] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”*

When the term “sleep” is used to depict the death of a person, the allusion is always to **the disposition of the body**, not the soul. There is no passage in the Scriptures properly understood, that reflects the notion that one’s **soul** sleeps (i.e., is unconscious) in death.

What about passages such as Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 which says:

*“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.”*

This is written from the standpoint of knowledge "under the sun", from the viewpoint of natural man who lives without thoughts for God. This restates the philosophy of unbelievers that "when you're dead, you're dead."

But even “man under the sun” understands the meaning of death:

**Ecclesiastes 12:7** *“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”*

The body returns to the dust, but the spirit returns to God. This is the difference between the death of man and beasts.

**Ecclesiastes 3:20-21** *“All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the*

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In both cases, death occurs when the spirit leaves the body:

**James 2:26** *“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”*

## Evidence against the Doctrine of Soul Sleep

Although the Bible uses the metaphor of “sleep” it is not the only way it describes death.

In the Old Testament, we read of the death of Abraham:

**Genesis 25:8** *“Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.”*

“This cannot refer to the interment of Abraham’s body. He was buried near Mamre in Palestine. Yet his ancestors had been entombed hundreds of miles away in distant lands! The expressions “gathered to his people,” and “going to his fathers” (Judges 2:10), are constantly distinguished from being buried and denote reunion with loved ones in Sheol, the sphere of departed spirits” (C.F. Keil & F. Delitzsch, The Pentateuch, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, I, p. 263).

On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Lord Jesus Christ spoke of his impending “decease” (Luke 9:31). The Greek word “decease” is also translated “exodus” – a moving from one place to another.

The Apostle Peter used this same Greek word to speak of his upcoming death in 2 Peter 1:15. He also tells us that Jesus “preached unto the spirits in prison after His death (1 Peter 3:18-19).

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The Apostle Paul described his death as a

“departure.”

**Philippians 1:21-23** *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”*

If Paul had thought his soul would only be sleeping for the time of his death until the resurrection, he would not have had any desire to die. He uses the same word in 2 Timothy 4:6.

And he had no doubt where he was going: **2 Corinthians 5:8** *“We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”*

Our Lord used more than metaphors to describe death. He told a story happened to two men who died- The Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 which disprove the doctrine of soul sleep.

1. Both men died – Lazarus was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom (Paradise), but the rich man found himself in hell.
2. Lazarus was comforted, but the rich man was tormented.
3. The Rich man could feel pain, see, speak, remember, recognize both Abraham and Lazarus, and have regrets. He clearly was not in a “dream-like state.”

Jesus also made a promise that disproves the idea of soul sleep. He said the repentant thief dying next to Him, *“...Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).*

### Examples Against the Doctrine of Soul Sleep

In addition to the examples noted above, there are several example of dead people being seen before the resurrection:

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- 1) **Samuel** was called up by a witch and talked to King Saul in 1 Samuel 28. Samuel told him of God’s judgment, *“...tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me: the LORD also shall deliver the host of Israel into the hand of the Philistines.”*
- 2) **Moses and Elijah** appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17, Mark 9, and Luke 9). They could be seen, heard, and recognized by the disciples.
- 3) **The Cloud of Witnesses** mentioned in Hebrew 11.
- 4) **The 24 Elders** seen in heaven by John in Revelation 4 & 5. They are described as having been redeemed.
- 5) **The “souls under the altar”** in Revelation 6, who “cry with a loud voice” for judgment. They are given white robes and told to “rest for yet a little while.”

**Conclusion: The doctrine of soul sleep is contrary to the teaching of the Word of God, and therefore should be rejected.**

**1 Thessalonians 4:14-18** *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*



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# THE TRUTH ABOUT SOUL SLEEP



*“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.”*

**-- Matthew 22:32**

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