

Shayla: When we die, will our souls sleep until the day of resurrection, or will we be conscious and aware of our environment?

Meforshim:

First, what is soul sleep?

For those who are unaware of the meaning of this term, allow me to briefly explain it before I answer the question. A minority of Christians (primarily Seventh Day Adventists) believe that upon death, our souls and spirits remain attached to our bodies and remain in the ground. They believe that when we die, we become unconscious and will remain so until our resurrection.

There is, at first blush, some biblical support for this view. Several Old Testament passages¹ seem to argue specifically for this point. Also, many argue that the fact that death is referred to as “sleep” also lends to this concept.²

Some basic cautionary principles of biblical interpretation:

First, we need to be cautious of building an entire doctrine based on four verses in the Bible. We must take the totality of the presentation of a biblical concept and allow that to interpret the minority of verses. To do it the other way around is to have the tail wag the dog.

Second, in biblical interpretation, we must be sure that we understand the perspective of the person making the statement. The Bible records thoughts and statements of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Even the righteous, being human, make untrue statements from time to time. Just because we find a given statement in the Bible does not necessarily make that statement true. For instance, Job’s friends said that his problems were due to sin on his part. That statement was patently untrue.

Again, consider the passage where Peter argues with Jesus that the Messiah should not discuss dying on the cross. Jesus’ response to this apostle (who would go on to preach the very first sermon of the church and lead thousands to the Lord in one day) was “Get behind me, Satan!”³

Third, we must take into consideration that human language itself presents certain inherent limitations. Though we understand that the Earth is a spinning ball that travels around Sol, we still refer to the periodic appearance of our star over the horizon as “sunrise” as though we are standing still and the sun is moving. It is simply a trick of the language, an easy way to refer to a daily fact from the perspective of a human. Similarly, there are passages in the Bible that are written using language that reflects the human perspective of the author.

Problem: failure of perspective

Psalms 6:4-5; 30:8-9; 88:10-12; 115:17 are just such passages. They are written from the perspective of the earthbound. When we look at the bodies of our dead loved ones, they appear still, unconscious and totally unable to do anything. The body has ceased moving and the person at times seems almost peacefully asleep.

It is interesting that in each of these passages, David is trying to argue with God for his life. He is in imminent physical danger and he is trying to give God good reason to keep him alive. If his spirit is in heaven, he may be able to praise God there, but clearly he was of no more use to Elohim on Earth. “God,” he says, “I can’t do you much good if I’m dead! So keep me going.” I have made exactly the same bargain with Elohim on numerous occasions in my adventurous life.

Further, this fits neatly with our interpretation of many Wisdom Literature passages such as the book of Ecclesiastes. Though inspired by the Holy Spirit, it too was written from the point of view of earthbound philosophy as indicated by the often repeated phrase “under the sun.” As long as it deals with “under the sun” kind of philosophy, everything is “vanity of vanities.” The Teacher finally concludes that all we can do is fear God and keep His commands.

We must also consider that there is a difference between the death of believers and unbelievers. The term “sleep” is only used to describe the death of believers. The term sleep is used to describe the state of the body. Even in common every day sleep, the body is generally still but the soul (mind, will and emotions) and the spirit (that part of us that communicates with God) continue to be active. This describes in a particularly vivid manner the state of the righteous dead, don’t you think?

¹ Psalm 6:4-5; 30:8-9; 88:10-12; 115:17

² 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 1 Corinthians 15:20, 51

³ Matthew 16:23; Mark 8:33 cp Luke 4:5-8

It is also important to note that in every case resurrection is discussed, it is the body – not the spirit - that is resurrected. If the soul/spirit is so closely associated with the body that it “goes to sleep” with the body, why is it that only the body needs to be resurrected?

Problem: hubris

One of the arguments “soul sleepers” make is that it would be cruel of God to snatch a spirit out of heaven and send it back to earth. Such an argument is not biblically based and presumes to know the mind of God.

Yahweh is not above seeming “callousness.” He is both the author of light and darkness, causing both well-being and calamity.⁴ He did, after all, drown humanity like an unwanted puppy. He ordered the systematic destruction of civilizations at the hand of the righteous. He commanded his prophet into a loveless marriage with an unfaithful prostitute simply to serve as a sermon illustration. In fact, He was willing to sacrifice His own Son to a cruel and savage death on a Roman cross. Who are we to presume to understand what He considers cruel?

Problem: transfiguration

We read of the Master’s transfiguration⁵ where Moses and Elijah appear on the Mount with Jesus and a few of His disciples. Elijah was taken to heaven alive.⁶ Moses died and was buried.⁷ Yet, on the occasion of the transfiguration, we see that Moses was just as consciously alive as Elijah. So we have a person who had been dead 1,500 years, a person who was simply taken alive to heaven and Person who was still living all discussing current events.⁸

Problem: Paul’s perception of death

Paul stated that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.⁹ We are told that the Master was taken up into heaven and sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand.¹⁰ Weeks later, Stephen saw Jesus standing there in Heaven while he being stoned to death.¹¹ So if the Messiah is in heaven and death causes us to absent our body and be with Him, how does this fit with soul sleep?

Paul was all about serving Christ. In fact, he was emotionally torn between staying alive and serving Christ or dying and being with Christ. He considered dying and being with Christ “far better”.¹² Paul goes on to say, “Nevertheless, to be in the flesh is more needful for you.” Ultimately, he considered staying to help out the saints in the church and fulfill his ministry to be his duty.

I would like to ask, however, that if when we die our souls and spirits remain attached to our bodies that lie in the ground, is Christ in the ground? And if that were so, in what way is this condition “far better?”

Problem: The body and spirit separate at death.

Peter referred to death as “putting off his tabernacle”¹³ as if our bodies are simply temporary dwelling places. He also told us that “the things which are seen” (describing our flesh) “perish” while the “things which are not seen” (describing our spirit) are “renewed every day” and “eternal.”¹⁴ He states, “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

James agreed, defining death as separation of the spirit from the body.¹⁵ He doesn't say the spirit also dies, he says the body without the spirit dies. In this, he reflects the Old Testament example of Rachel’s

⁴ Isaiah 45:7

⁵ Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36

⁶ 2 Kings 2:11

⁷ Deuteronomy 34:4-7 cp Jude 9

⁸ Luke 9:31 cp Hebrews 12:1

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:8

¹⁰ Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:10-12

¹¹ Acts 7:55

¹² Philippians 1:23-24

¹³ 2 Peter 1:13

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

¹⁵ James 2:26

death where her death is described as her soul departing her body.¹⁶ Solomon taught¹⁷ that at death the body goes into the ground while the spirit returns to God. His father, David, (who wrote the very passages mentioned above from which the “soul sleepers” argue) also agreed that upon death the spirit flies away.¹⁸

The Master taught that there was a difference in the condition of the soul and that of the body.¹⁹ We are not to fear those who can only kill the body and not the soul. Clearly, He taught that the death of the body did not necessarily entail the “death” of the soul. The only time the death of both the body AND the soul occurs is in hell, according to Christ.

By the way, the word for “destruction” in this passage is *apollumi* which can involve torment as well as the finality of death, but that is for an entirely different study.

Problem: John’s vision of heaven

John’s prophetic revelation of heaven is particularly informative. Prior to the rapture, while the Antichrist is yet able to “prevail against the saints”, John says that the spirits of dead saints will gather before the throne of God and cry out “how long will you allow this to continue?”.²⁰ Clearly, these folks are aware of their environment, conscious of the state of affairs on Earth, have passionate feelings about it and are able to communicate with God! This fits nicely with Hebrews’ referral to the righteous dead as a “great cloud of witnesses.”²¹

Problem: Christ’s teaching on “Paradise”

One last issue I have with the idea of soul sleep is that it fails to take into consideration the idea of Sheol. To better visualize the Hebrew idea of Sheol, consider the following:



Before the death burial and resurrection of our Master, there used to be a place called Sheol, or the Abode of the Dead, where the righteous dead went to a compartment called Ganeden, Paradise or

¹⁶ Genesis 35:18
¹⁷ Ecclesiastes 12:6-7
¹⁸ Psalm 90:10
¹⁹ Matthew 10:28
²⁰ Revelation 6:9-11
²¹ Hebrews 12:1

Abraham's Bosom and the unrighteous dead went to a separate compartment known by the Jews as Gehenna and by the Greeks as Hades.

In Ephesians 4:8, we are told that when Jesus ascended on high, He "led captive a host of captives." This is a quote and adaptation of Psalm 68:18. In 1 Peter 3:19, we see that Christ is said to have proclaimed the truth of His atonement to the dead, the "spirits now in prison." If we compare that to Matthew 27:52 where the tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had died were raised, we begin to get the following picture: Christ, upon His death, went to the compartment of sheol known as "paradise" or "Abraham's Bosom". Those people that had been waiting there, the righteous dead, were then delivered – some to be immediately resurrected and others to ascend to heaven. If the souls of the dead are unconscious, to whom did Christ preach?

Just before Jesus died, He promised the thief on the cross that they would be together in Paradise, not heaven.²² Jesus had earlier described Sheol's Paradise²³ as being a place where souls were conscious and able to hold conversations. Some will argue that Jesus' teaching in Luke 16 was a parable, but I'm not sure how that would invalidate the teaching even if it were true. Are they saying that Jesus taught untruths when speaking in parables? Did Jesus have a different eschatology when He spoke in parables? And I am not sure that the passage IS a parable. In what other parable did Jesus ever name a specific character?

Conclusion

There are too few verses and too many that are controversial in their interpretation, to warrant the development of a doctrine that goes directly against the clear teaching of the majority of Christians for two thousand years, and the apparent understanding of the afterlife of the pre-Christ saints for thousands of years before that.

We should not allow the "tail" to wag the dog in this, but instead, should allow the preponderance of Scripture to interpret the four or five verses that the "soul sleepers" use.

²² Luke 23:43

²³ Luke 16:22-23