

SOUL SLEEP

Is it Scriptural?

John R. Ecob D.D.

The teaching generally known as “soul sleep” maintains that when a person dies there is no conscious existence until the body is raised at the resurrection and thus it **denies the immortality of the soul**. Seventh Day Adventists hold this view and take great pleasure in pointing to scriptures that speak of persons in the Bible who died, and note that the Scripture says they “*slept*”, therefore they conclude there can be no conscious existence after death. What does the Bible teach?

Death is Sleep

The Bible speaks of death as sleep without any qualification as to whether it refers to the body, soul, or spirit but the context of its use will clarify the matter for us.

There are 36 references in the Old Testament which state that a certain king “*slept with his fathers*”. A few minutes with a concordance will verify this fact. The statement is usually followed by the words “*and was buried*.”

The statement begs the question, Where were his fathers? Wherever they (the fathers) were, is where he went.

It would seem that the statement refers to **the grave**. i.e. to **where the king slept**, in a tomb or grave, and could only relate to the body of the deceased. His fathers were put into the grave and the king’s body was placed in the tomb with his fathers. The term sleep is obviously synonymous with death; ie the King died and was buried. The inference is that the body one day would **awake** in resurrection.

Daniel spoke of sleep **in the dust** when he wrote:

*“And many of them that **sleep in the dust** of the earth **shall awake**, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”*
(Dan.12:2).

The sleeping is “*in the dust*” and this can only refer to the body and the awaking refers to resurrection.

Those who teach “soul sleep” conclude that death brings a **cessation of any conscious existence** and consequently have to believe that the soul is not immortal and **after physical death, ceases to exist**. In other words they believe that after death there is left nothing but to wait for the resurrection. We need to compare Scripture with Scripture to see what the Bible teaches.

Made in the Image of God

When God created man He made his body from the dust but then He breathed into man the breath of life and man “*became a living soul*” (Gen.2:7). This would imply that man was more than a body but no detail is offered.

We do know that when God made man He made him **in his own image and likeness**. The animals were given physical life but God did not make them in His own likeness (Gen.1:26-27).

Now we know that God is tripartate: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit yet one God. We also know that man in his **entire make up** is tripartate: body, soul, and spirit. Paul wrote:

*“The very God of peace sanctify you **wholly**; and I pray God your **whole spirit, and soul, and body** be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1Thess.5:23).

This Scripture indicates that the **complete person** consists of “body, soul, and spirit”. Man is not just a “living creature” like the animals.

We are to cleanse ourselves from “*all filthiness of the flesh and spirit*” (2Cor.7:1). There are sins in the realm of the flesh and there are sins in the realm of our spirit.

The body is our earth-consciousness, our soul is our self-consciousness and our spirit is our God-consciousness. To the Corinthians, Paul stated that our body is a “*tabernacle*” in which we dwell and that at death, we leave our earthly, material house:

*“For we know that if our **earthly house of this tabernacle** were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For **in this we groan**, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are **in this tabernacle***

*do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life....Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst **we are at home in the body**, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be **absent from the body**, and to be present with the Lord” (2Cor.5:1-8).*

It is obvious that Paul considered our bodies as the house in which we live and that **believers depart from their body at death to be with Christ which is far better**. In the 12th chapter of the same epistle Paul sites an instance known to him personally and which occurred 14 years earlier.

There seems little doubt that Paul was referring to himself in the third person and was relating his own experience 14 years earlier when he was stoned at Lystra, dragged out of the city and left for dead, but when the deciples prayed over him he was raised to life (Acts 14:19-20):

*“I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether **in the body**, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether **in the body**, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and **heard unspeakable words**, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2Cor.12:2-4).*

Paul did not know for sure whether his soul had actually entered Paradise or whether he had seen it in a vision. If he actually saw paradise then he must have left his body but if it was a vision then his soul had not left his body. It would be impossible to draw any other conclusion.

Saved Souls in Heaven

The Apostle John was given a vision of things in heaven and he saw **the souls of martyred saints in heaven**. They were not sleeping or in any unconscious state for we read:

*“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw **under the altar the souls of them that were slain** for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And **they cried with a loud voice**, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and*

Soul Sleep

avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” (Rev.6:9-11).

It is clear that these martyrs from the Tribulation period were souls who had left their earthly tabernacle and had gone to heaven. Vengeance would be administered on their persecutors but not for a short period of time during which **they would be joined by more saints from earth** who would also be martyred. If the soul perishes at physical death then this passage would not make sense.

Unsaved Souls in “Sheol”

In the Old Testament we have an example of the unsaved who have died and their souls have gone to the torment section of *sheol*. The judgment of the King of Babylon is described and we read:

“Hell (sheol) from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All they shall speak and say unto thee, Art thou also become weak as we? art thou become like unto us? (Isa.14:9-10).

The kings from earth who had been slain by the King of Babylon would be amazed that their slayer had been slain and his soul was in *hades* with them. Thus we see that the souls of the saved departed for paradise at death and the souls of the unsaved departed for *hades* at death and their souls are conscious, able to speak and communicate with each other.

Two Parts in Sheol

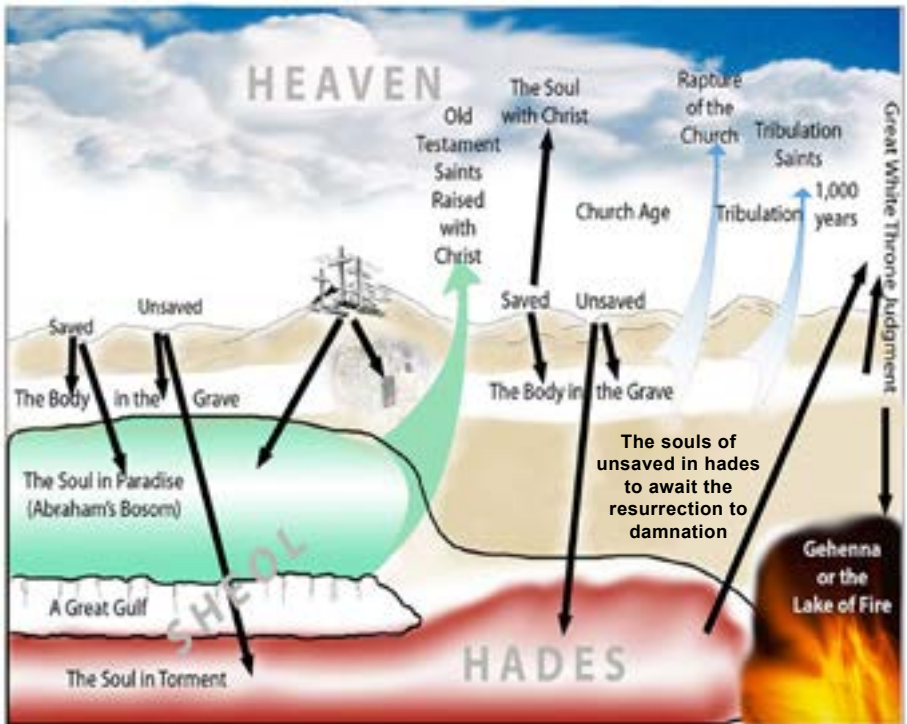
Jesus drew the veil aside to show what lay beyond the grave in His day in Luke 16:19-31.

*“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,...And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and **was buried**; And in*

hell (hades) he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And **he cried and said**, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But **Abraham said**, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but **NOW he is comforted, and thou art tormented**. And beside all this, **between us and you there is a great gulf fixed**: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence” (Luke 16:19-26).

The words of Christ are not a parable: there was a **certain rich man** known to Jesus and a beggar named Lazarus sat at his gate.

Before Christ rose from the dead all souls went to *sheol* (literally, “unseen realm”) whether they were saved or unsaved. Abraham’s bosom is where the saved waited with faithful Abraham for Christ to come, while a place of torment is where the unsaved waited for



the resurrection to damnation at the future Great White Throne judgment. The souls in both sections of *sheol* were conscious and had memory and feelings. The bodies of both the rich man and Lazarus had been **buried** yet their souls continued to exist in a conscious state.

Where Did Jesus Go When He Died?

While Jesus was on the cross the two malefactors railed on Him but one repented and said, “*Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom*”. Jesus replied, “*Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise*”.

Jesus’ body was placed in the tomb and the body of the repentant thief would have been cast out to burn yet **both were together that day in paradise**. On the 3rd day Jesus rose from the dead as the “*firstfruits of them that slept*” and the graves of the Old Testament saints were opened and they rose with Christ. Many even appeared in Jerusalem. (Matt.27:52-53).

Paul spoke of this event:

*“Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he **first descended into the lower parts of the earth?** He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)”* (Eph.4:8-10).

When Jesus died His soul went to Paradise with the Old Testament saints and Lazarus was with them in paradise. When Jesus ascended He took all those saints who had been waiting in paradise into heaven. **Paradise was relocated to heaven** as Paul indicated in 2Cor.12:1-4 where he speaks of seeing things and hearing things in the “*third heaven*” which he also described as “*paradise*”. The first heaven is the atmosphere, the second heaven is space, and the third heaven is God’s dwelling place.

Samuel Appeared from Sheol

When King Saul was facing defeat from the Philistine armies he went to the witch of Endor to enquire how the coming battle would go and he asked her to make Samuel appear so that he could ask him.

The witch could not do this but by witchcraft could have a demon, her own familiar spirit, impersonate Samuel. However, God intervened and allowed Samuel to appear and the witch was terrified (1Sam.28:12). Samuel then addressed Saul and told him he would perish in battle.

Samuel had been dead and his body buried for years but his soul had gone to the paradise section of *sheol* to await the coming of Christ. He was not in an unconscious state and could communicate a message from God in just the same way that he did when he was alive in the body. He had an immortal soul.

Moses and Elijah Appeared With Jesus

When Jesus took Peter, James, and John, into Mount Hermon they saw Him transfigured before them and Moses and Elijah appeared talking with Jesus. They discussed Jesus' decease which He would accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9:31) when He would die as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world.

Moses and Elijah had died hundreds of years before but they were still very conscious and looking forward to being relocated in resurrection bodies to heaven with the Lord. God had buried the bodies of Moses and Elijah so that these great prophets would not be worshipped after death.

Christians are with Christ Immediately after Death

Paul spoke of what happens when a Christian dies and indicated that death is but departure from the body and relocation to heaven with the Lord. When his own death became imminent he said:

"I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand....I have finished my course...Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day" (2Tim.4:6-8).

Paul was beheaded and his body buried at Rome but he departed to be with Christ which is **far better**. Death was not cessation of conscious existence but a conscious existence in the unseen realm where he would be rewarded for faithful service to the Lord.

Who is in Heaven Now?

*“But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to an innumerable company of **angels**, To the general assembly and **church** of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to **God** the Judge of all, and to the **spirits of just men made perfect**, And to **Jesus** the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel” (Heb.12:22-24).*

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jews to explain how there was a new dispensation since Christ died and rose again. The Law had passed and was fulfilled by Christ. Whereas the Law required the nation of Israel to come to the earthly Jerusalem to worship the Lord, the believers, mainly Gentiles in the new dispensation (administration), had no earthly centre to worship at but could come at any time by faith to God in the heavenly Jerusalem. There in heaven, could be found

1) An *“innumerable company of angels”*.

2) the *“general assembly and Church of the firstborn”*. The only place the Church will be in **one location** is when it is in heaven. On earth there are local assemblies in different locations. When Christians die they are absent from the body and present with the Lord so this company is comprised of all the saved who have died since the Church began on the day of Pentecost.

3) The *“spirits of just(ified) men made perfect”*.

4) Of course *“God, the judge of all men”* is there and the risen man Christ Jesus is at God’s right hand. But who are these *“spirits of just(ified) men made perfect? (complete)”*

The Church-age saints are not yet made perfect but these other justified men have been perfected.

Salvation is threefold. At conversion we are saved from the **penalty** of sin and we become a new creature in Christ. Daily we are being saved from the **power** of sin by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and one day when the Rapture occurs, we will be saved from the **presence** of sin. Our *“vile body”* shall be *“fashioned like*

unto his glorious body" in resurrection (Phil.3:21). **Only then will we be perfected.**

So these spirits of justified men have already been **made perfect in resurrection** and are around the throne in heaven. They are the **Old Testament saints** who rose with Christ as described in Matthew 27:52-53.

These Old Testament saints had been waiting in the paradise section of *sheol* for Christ to come in the fulness of time. When Christ died His soul went to Paradise with the souls of the Old Testament saints and when He ascended to heaven He took them with him as Ephesians 4:8-10 plainly states.

When John was given the Book of Revelation in AD96, he was given a vision of the throne in heaven and before the throne were 24 elders leading the worship at the throne of God. These are the **24 elders appointed by David to lead the worship in the Temple** on earth. They were raised from the dead with Christ and now serve in the heavenly Temple. See 1Chronicles chapter 24 where their names are given. In 1Chronicles chapter 25 there are also 24 sons of Asaph who led the praise at the Temple and in chapter 26 there were daily 24 porters at the gates of the Temple.

The 24 elders lead the worship of the Old Testament saints who have already been glorified, but the "*Church of the Firstborn*" (from the grave), who is Christ, have not yet been glorified. These wait for the day when Christ will come into the air to gather His Bride, His **complete Church**. That's why Paul said that them also that "*sleep in Jesus*" (1Thess.4:14) would come **with** Christ at the Rapture in order to be raised first **before** the living saints are changed. Old Testament saints were never baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor.12:13). Only New Testament saints, all of whom are part of the Church, are "*in Christ*" ie in the body of Christ.

The Souls of Church-Age Saints will Come with Christ at the Rapture

*"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them **which are asleep**, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even*

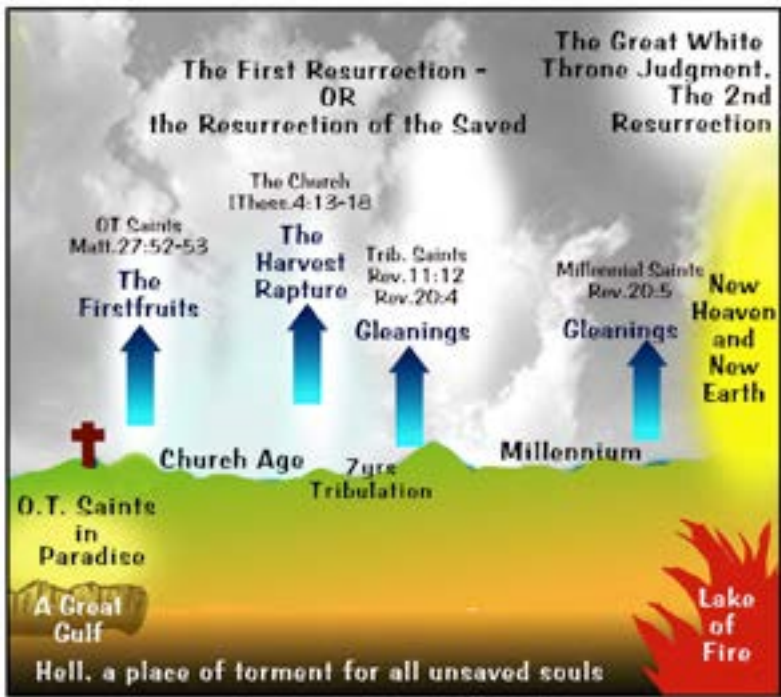
so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him”
 (1Thess.4:13-14).

The Old Testament saints have already been raised with Christ but the Church-age saints who have died since the day of Pentecost, will be raised **before** the Tribulation begins. This is called the Rapture of the Church when the **entire Church**, both living saints and those who “*sleep in Jesus*”, will receive their resurrection bodies.

So Paul says that those who sleep in Jesus “*will God bring with him*”. The souls of the saints went into the presence of the Lord at death but will come **with Christ into the air** and be reunited with their bodies in resurrection power.

*“The dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be **caught up together** with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord”* (1Thess. 4:16-17).

How could the saints who have died, come WITH Jesus in order that their bodies be raised if they did not have an immortal soul?



The Unsaved of All Ages will be Raised to Damnation

At the end of the millennial kingdom there will be a resurrection of the unsaved from all time. Their souls are brought from *hades* (called *sheol* in the Hebrew Old Testament) and their bodies raised from the grave to stand in a resurrection body before the Great White Throne where they will receive judgment for the deeds done in the body. So we read:

"...and death (the body) and hell (the soul in hades) delivered up the dead which were in them...And death (the body) and hell (hades where the souls are) were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Rev.20:13-15).

These are brought from death (the body) and hades (the soul) to be **reunited** in a resurrection body. *Hades* is the place of departed souls who await the resurrection to damnation that Jesus spoke about in John 5:29.

"The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

Daniel spoke of two resurrections for those who die during the Tribulation:

"And at that time...many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan.12:1-2).

Jesus warned:

"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell (gehenna, not hades), into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43-44).

"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (gehenna)" (Matt.10:28).

The lake of fire is *gehenna* (in the Greek language) where resurrected unsaved are cast after the Great White Throne judgment whereas *hades* is where the souls of unsaved go after death to await the resurrection to damnation. It is clear from Jesus' words that

resurrected persons are also immortal and will continue for all eternity.

“God is a spirit” (John 4:24) and cannot cease to exist. Angels are spirits (Heb.1:7) and cannot cease to exist. Man is body, soul, and spirit and as such, he cannot cease to exist either in heaven or in the lake of fire.

The Lake of Fire is NOT Annihilation

The Seventh Day Adventist concept that man is only a body with life and when the body of the unsaved is raised it will be cast into the lake of fire and **turned to ashes** is totally contrary to Scripture. The Bible makes it clear that the lake of fire is **for ever** and those who are unbelievers will endure the punishments of the lake of fire for all eternity.

*“If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth **up for ever and ever**: and **they have no rest day nor night**, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name”* (Rev.14:9-11).

Man has a **mortal body and an immortal soul and spirit**, but when resurrection takes place the body becomes immortal. Paul said:

*“For this corruptible must **put on** incorruption, and this mortal (body) must **put on** immortality. So when this corruptible shall have **put on** incorruption, and this **mortal shall have put on immortality**, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory”* (1Cor.15:53-54).

What is true for the saved is also true for the unsaved. Man is an eternal being with an immortal soul and spirit. **Only the body is mortal but it becomes immortal in resurrection.** When the Bible speaks of death it means separation from God for all eternity in a conscious state. It does not mean annihilation.

When Christ returns in glory and power Antichrist will be slain and cast into the lake of fire (*gehenna*) according to Revelation 19:20

and 1,000 years later Satan will be loosed from his prison in the bottomless pit, to deceive the nations.

The final revolt against Christ and His people will follow and he will raise an army to

“compass the camp of the saints about, and the holy city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them” (Rev.20:9).

Satan will then be taken and cast into the lake of fire

“where the beast (Antichrist) and the false prophet ARE, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev.20:10).

Scripture does NOT say, “where the beast and the false prophet were cast” but where they **ARE; 1,000 years after being cast into the lake of fire.** They were not turned to ashes as Seventh Day Adventists want us to believe and are still in eternal torment in the lake of fire.

There are no grounds for believing that the lake of fire is destruction. It is eternal torment.

Thus we see that Scripture is unanimous that every man has an immortal soul and a mortal body. At death the body returns to dust; to the elements from which it was originally made, and the soul goes either to heaven if saved, and to *hades* if unsaved. There are two resurrections; the resurrection to life for the saved and the resurrection to damnation for the unsaved. The resurrections are in several stages. Hades is a remand centre where unsaved wait to be sentenced at the Great White Throne.

The resurrection to life or the “first resurrection” occurs:

- i) When Christ rose; for the Old Testament saints (firstfruits)
- ii) At the Rapture; when the Church is complete (harvest).
- iii) When Christ returns; for the Tribulation martyrs (gleanings).
- iv) At the end of the 1,000 year kingdom; for millennial saints (gleanings).

The resurrection to damnation occurs:

- a) At the Second Advent; for Antichrist and his followers
- b) At the end of the 1,000-year reign of Christ; for all other unsaved souls.