

Where Are The Righteous Dead?

By

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Geoffrey R. Davies, an evangelist in Australia, pauses from his very active ministry in order to share with us some of his recent thinking about matters which he once took for granted. Regardless of whether you agree with him, you'll want to follow his reasoning and the Scriptures he cites as you consider this important Bible question.

How I Began This Study

“Is that your own idea, or have others suggested it to you?” (John 18:34, NEB).

This was the question that the Lord Jesus put to Pontius Pilate. The Master was interested to know whether Pilate had taken the time and effort to find out the truth for himself, or whether he had taken the easy route of accepting the view of the majority without question.

Regrettably, many of us tend to accept traditional views on Bible doctrines without serious question. While God requires us to have a teachable spirit, He also expects us to weigh and consider what we are taught before reaching settled convictions. The believers at Berea were commended for this attitude, for it is declared of them that “they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Recently I asked myself what I believed about the after-life and why I believed it. Had I, over many years, simply accepted what “others” had taught me, or had I thoroughly “searched the Scriptures whether these things were so?”

There followed a time of searching, struggle, and finally, surrender to the conclusions set out in this article. I have not written for the benefit of theologians or for Bible Scholars, but for fellow believers who are familiar with the traditional view, but who are prepared to consider the possibility of an alternative position.

Matters For Consideration

The purpose of this paper is to examine briefly the Bible teaching on the state of the dead and the after-life. In particular the following question will be considered: Are the righteous dead now in heaven, fully conscious, and enjoying the presence of the Lord Jesus, and, if so, in what form do they exist; i.e., do they have bodies or are they in non-corporeal form?

Guiding Principles

In preparing this article and reaching my conclusions there are several basic principles I have endeavored to follow.

The first is the principle of the *weight of evidence*. One of the methods by which we can determine the importance of any Bible subject is by calculating just how often the Bible refers to the matter. Where God emphasizes a truth repeatedly, we gather that He obviously wishes to draw our attention to its importance. On the other hand, where a theme is referred to only occasionally, we conclude that although it must be considered

important, as is all truth, the lesser truth should not be over-emphasized to the point where we lose sight of the mainstream of Bible truth. It follows then that our emphasis on any subject should be in direct proportion to the emphasis given to that subject throughout the Scripture. In other words, we should major in majors and not in minors. As I began to consider this matter I soon realized that I was involved in a major theme and that, in order to do it justice, I should list every Scripture that appeared to have a bearing on the subject, that is all those verses which deal with the present state and location of the dead, see lists on pages (following). These Scriptures will, I trust, give us an overview of what God is saying to us about these matters, their importance and significance, as well as providing a ready reference to the source material from which my conclusions have been drawn.

A second principle I have endeavored to follow is the *rule of consistency*. Believing God's word to be harmonious, we would not expect the writes to contradict each other, rather we would expect the Holy Spirit to speak with one voice. Where God gives us a consistent, clear theme on any subject He will not negate it by the isolated or obscure verse which appears, at first sight, to be out of harmony with the mainstream of truth. The subject we are considering is like any other major doctrine in that there are difficult and obscure passages that must receive our attention. However, such difficulties should not prevent us reaching settled convictions based on the consensus of truth that God has given us.

A further principle I have borne in mind has been to ensure that my *conclusions are in agreement with what the Lord Jesus Himself taught* on the subject. It is not that I believe there are degrees in inspiration in the Bible. I believe that it is all equally inspired. However, since Jesus is "the truth," I felt it prudent to examine His teachings on these matters before arriving at settled convictions. When I did this I found that He referred to death as a state of sleep (John 11:11) and also that He warned His disciples to "fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

With the above principles in mind, we find from the Scriptures listed that on no less than 67 occasions in the Bible, death is referred to as "sleep." The Old Testament contains 47 of these references and the New Testament 20, and they appear in 17 books of the Bible. In addition, both the righteous and the wicked dead are said to be asleep, totally unconscious, awaiting the resurrection and the final judgment. The relevant Scriptures listed should be read before proceeding further with this paper.

Coming now to our Lord's own teaching on the matter, we find that on several occasions He referred to death as a sleep (see John 11:11, Matthew 9:24, Mark 5:39, and Luke 8:52). His comments regarding the death of Lazarus in John 11:11 are particularly significant, for He said, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep." Plainly Lazarus was dead (John 11:14) and had Jesus not "awakened" him, he must have continued sleeping, like all other who had died before him, until "the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24, Daniel 12:2). We could also note that it was not merely the body of Lazarus, apart from his soul that was sleeping, for Jesus referred to him as "our friend Lazarus" who was dead. His spirit had returned to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7, James 2:26).

In 1 Corinthians 15:20, the Lord is referred to as "the first-fruits of them that slept," surely indicating that He was asleep in the tomb between the time of His death and His resurrection and that His experience was a pattern for others who would rise from the

sleep of death at the resurrection at the last day and “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). Furthermore, He assured His disciples that He would come again and receive them unto Himself “that where I am there you may be also” (John 14:3). They were to be with Him in glory at the time of His coming, but not beforehand.

The death of Stephen, recorded in Acts 7:59–60, is in harmony with the principle I have explained. As he was being stoned, Stephen committed his spirit to the Lord and “fell asleep.” One might well wonder whether Stephen’s death would have been described as “falling asleep” if it had occurred in our day. It is more than likely that if a Christian publication were to report on Stephen’s death, it would be stated that he had been “called home” or “gone to be with the Lord.” Although these expressions are in common use among certain believers, they never occur in Scripture for the obvious reason that they are not Scriptural. Surely it would be safer and more correct to describe the death of the believer as “falling asleep in Jesus” (I Thessalonians 4:14).

Such clear, consistent, and convincing evidence teaching that the dead, both the righteous and the wicked (apart from a few exceptions which we will consider), are asleep in the grave until the resurrection cannot be negated by the few Scriptures which, at first sight, may appear to teach otherwise. By referring to the subject no less than 67 times in His word, God wanted us to be abundantly clear about the matter. Indeed there are subjects which receive far less scriptural coverage and yet occupy much more of our attention. We could think of such matters as water baptism, Holy Spirit baptism and speaking in tongues which, though important, are not referred to as frequently as the state and location of the dead. Surely such a prominent theme is significant and deserving of our attention.

To some believers, the thought of sleeping in the grave for an indeterminate period could be disquieting, but there is no occasion for such concern. In the first place, death as a sleep need not be thought of as a long semi-conscious experience which might continue for centuries, for the sleeping believer is totally unaware of the passage of time. We are told in Ecclesiastes 9:5 that “the dead know not anything” and the Christian’s next conscious experience after death will be to awaken in the presence of Jesus together with all of the redeemed.

Moreover, sleep is an experience with which we are all familiar; it is far less formidable than our concept of death with its associated gloom. When death is accepted as a peaceful sleep, its harshness is softened. In addition, the fact that all of the righteous dead sleep until the resurrection means that the coming of the Lord Jesus is equally near for all believers for, when referring to the Lord’s coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 (NIV), Paul tells us, “...we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who are fallen asleep.” So all of the redeemed enter the Lord’s presence together, “and so shall we be forever with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

There have been four instances where God has already raised men from the sleep of death or translated them. They are:

1. Enoch, who was translated and did not see death (Hebrews 11:5).
2. Elijah, who did not die but was taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11).
3. Moses, who appeared in glory with Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:30).

4. The saints who arose from the grave after the Lord's resurrection (Matthew 27:52–53).

Nevertheless, nobody has gone to heaven upon the end of life here. Even King David, whom God said was “a man after mine own heart” (Acts 13:22) “is not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:29–34).

Soul Sleep

I have refrained from using the term “soul sleep” when referring to the state of the dead, partly because it is unscriptural and also because it could lead to confusion. As will be noted from the Scriptures listed below, it is the person himself, e.g., David, Stephen and others who are said to be asleep and not their soul that is sleeping. It could be more appropriate to refer to the death of the believer as being “asleep in Jesus,” or that, like Stephen, they had simply “fallen asleep.”

Objections Considered

There are several Scriptures which are often quoted to support a view that at the time of his death, the believer does not sleep in the grave until the resurrection, but that his redeemed soul, in disembodied form, enters at once into the presence of the Lord, there to await the second coming of the Lord Jesus. At that time, it is taught, his soul will accompany the Lord Jesus on His return, and be united with his glorified body. (See: the Westminster Confession, Chapter 32.)

Probably the Scripture most frequently referred to in support of this view is 2 Corinthians 5:8 which reads, “We are confident I say, and willing rather, to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” It will be helpful in our consideration of this passage if we examine the context, commencing from 2 Corinthians 4:14. Paul tells us that in all his trials he is sustained by the prospect that God will raise him up, and “present” him, together with the Corinthians, at the resurrection. Had he seen the possibility of being with the Lord beforehand at the time of his death he must surely have mentioned the fact here or elsewhere, but he does not do so. Indeed, he has no wish to be “unclothed” or “naked,” that is, without his “earthly house” which was his present body. He prefers not to die and disintegrate, rather his longing is to be “clothed upon” with his immortal body, his “house from heaven.” Now if his death would admit him immediately to the presence of God, surely he would not mind being with Jesus, although “unclothed,” until the resurrection. But this is not his longing. Instead he says emphatically that he does not desire this (2 Corinthians 5:3, 4).

He had already told the Corinthians that at the second coming of Jesus they would be changed and receive their immortal bodies (1 Corinthians 15:51–54), but there is no suggestion here, nor in any of Paul's other letters, that he anticipated being with the Lord without his glorified body which he would receive at the resurrection (Philippians 3:20, 21, 1 Thessalonians 4:17). With this certainty, John is in complete accord, for he tells us that “we shall see Him” and “be like Him” when he returns (1 John 3:2).

When did Paul anticipate being “absent from the body and present with the Lord?” He longed that it might be in his lifetime but, if this was not to be, he looked beyond his present trials and was “confident” that it would take place at the resurrection.

A further Scripture for our attention is Philippians 1:23—“For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ which is far better.” When

Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians he was a prisoner in Rome. He is nearing the end of a life which had been marked with severe hardship, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, hunger and thirst, loneliness and perils of every sort. Regardless of this, his spirit is still buoyant and joyful. He knows that soon he will depart from this life and “at that day”—that is, at the resurrection—he will receive a “crown of righteousness” (2 Timothy 4:6–8). He is ready to die but willing to live and to serve, whichever would be pleasing to the Lord. “To die,” he says, “is gain” for it would mean an end of his trials and, after a brief interval of sleep, he would awaken on the resurrection morning, with his immortal body in the presence of the Lord, together with the saints of all ages. Surely this would be “far better.” But, as Paul has made quite clear to us, the only way of being “with Christ” in glory is by way of the Lord’s return. Small wonder that he “loved” the prospect (2 Timothy 4:8).

A final Scripture which we will consider is Luke 23:43 where Jesus addressed the dying, penitent thief with the words, “Verily I say unto thee today thou shalt be with me in Paradise.” Some believe our Lord’s words give reason to believe that all who die in faith will be in Paradise with Jesus on the day they die. However, for various reasons, I believe this conclusion does not follow.

Firstly, as is well known, the Greek language used in the original Bible manuscripts did not contain punctuation, but our translators, in placing a comma after the word “thee,” have given a specific emphasis to our Lord’s words which could have been quite different had the comma been placed elsewhere; for example, had it been inserted after the word “today.” Furthermore, in the interest of intellectual honesty, it should be known that, since the decease of the apostle Luke, there has never been nor is there today, a Greek grammarian who can say dogmatically whether the comma in an English translation of the Bible should be placed before or after “thee.” Accordingly, no doctrine can be established either way on this text. (However, the great importance of the doctrine we are considering should not be influenced in any way by the mere placement of a comma.) But there are also other considerations.

One of these is that Our Lord did not go to Paradise that day for, as we have already learned, He was asleep in the grave between the time of His death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20). A further point is that, following his death, whenever that might have been, the thief did not go to Paradise, but like all who died “in Christ,” he fell asleep to awaken at the resurrection on the last day. The Lord’s words to the thief were simply a guarantee that he would go to Paradise, but He did not specify when that would be.

Summary

The three Scriptures at which we have looked at very briefly, although often used to support the view that believers go to heaven to be with Jesus immediately after their death do not, I believe, give ground for such a conclusion, particularly when placed beside the wide range of Scriptures which teach otherwise. I believe it is a case of our judgment being determined by the conclusive weight of evidence which teaches that the dead are now sleeping in the grave, rather than allowing one’s conviction to rest on the isolated verse which, at first sight, appears to differ from the overview of what the Bible is saying.

Old Testament

- 1.—Deut. 31:16—“Thou [Moses] shalt sleep with thy fathers.”
- 2.—2 Sam. 7:12—“Thou [David] shalt sleep with thy fathers.”
- 3.—1 Kings 2:10—“The king [David] shall sleep with his fathers.”
- 4.—1 Kings 2:10—“So David slept with his fathers.”
- 5.—1 Kings 11:21—“David slept with his fathers.”
- 6.—1 Kings 11:43—“Solomon slept with his fathers.”
- 7.—1 Kings 14:20—“He [Jeroboam] slept with his fathers.”
- 8.—1 Kings 14:31—“Rehoboam slept with his fathers.”
- 9.—1 Kings 15:8—“Abijam slept with his fathers.”
- 10.—1 Kings 15:24—“Asa slept with his fathers.”
- 11.—1 Kings 16:6—“Baasha slept with his fathers.”
- 12.—1 Kings 16:28—“Omri slept with his fathers.”
- 13.—1 Kings 22:40—“Ahab slept with his fathers.”
- 14.—1 Kings 22:50—“Jehoshaphat slept with his fathers.”
- 15.—2 Kings 8:24—“Joram slept with his fathers.”
- 16.—2 Kings 10:35—“Jehu slept with his fathers.”
- 17.—2 Kings 13:9—“Jehoahaz slept with his fathers.”
- 18.—2 Kings 13:13—“Joash slept with his fathers.”
- 19.—2 Kings 14:16—“Jehoash slept with his fathers.”
- 20.—2 Kings 14:22—“The King [Azariah] slept with his fathers.”
- 21.—2 Kings 14:29—“Jereboam slept with his fathers.”
- 22.—2 Kings. 15:7—“Azariah slept with his fathers.”
- 23.—2 Kings 15:22—“Menahem slept with his fathers.”
- 24.—2 Kings 15:38—“Jotham slept with his fathers.”
- 25.—2 Kings 16:20—“Ahaz slept with his fathers.”
- 26.—2 Kings 20:21—“Hezekiah slept with his fathers.”
- 27.—2 Kings 21:18—“Manesseh slept with his fathers.”
- 28.—2 Kings 24:6—“Jehoiakim slept with his fathers.”
- 29.—2 Chr. 9:31—“Solomon slept with his fathers.”
- 30.—2 Chr. 12:16—“Rehoboam slept with his fathers.”
- 31.—2 Chr. 14:1—“Abijah slept with his fathers.”
- 32.—2 Chr. 16:13—“Asa slept with his fathers.”
- 33.—2 Chr. 21:1 —“Jehosophat slept with his fathers.”
- 34.—2 Chr. 26:2—“The king [Uzziah] slept with his fathers.”
- 35.—2 Chr. 26:23—“Uzziah slept with his fathers.”
- 36.—2 Chr. 27:9—“Jotham slept with his fathers.”
- 37.—2 Chr. 28:27—“Ahaz slept with his fathers.”
- 38.—2 Chr. 32:33—“Hezekiah slept with his fathers.”
- 39.—2 Chr. 33:20—“Manasseh slept with his fathers.”
- 40.—Job 3:13—“I should have slept; then had I been at rest.”
- 41.—Job 7:21—“Now shall I sleep in the dust.”
- 42.—Job 14:12—“So man lieth down and riseth not: till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep.”
- 43.—Psalm 13:3—“Lest I sleep the sleep of death.”
- 44.—Psalm 76:5—“They have slept their sleep.”

- 45.—Psalm 90:5—“They are as a sleep.”
 46.—Jer. 51:39—“sleep a perpetual sleep.”
 47.—Dan. 12:2—“Them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.”

New Testament

- 48, 49 & 50—Matt. 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:32—“The maid is not dead but sleeps.” (The Lord said she was not dead but asleep. She was in fact quite dead, but what He meant was that she was not to continue under the power of death but would be raised from it as a person is awakened from natural sleep. It is possible that some of those present favored the opinion of the Sadducees and that they understood by here being dead that she had ceased to be and that she could never be raised up again.)
 51.—Matt. 27:52—“Many bodies of the saints which slept arose.”
 52 & 53—“John 11:11—“Our friend Lazarus sleeps but I go that I may awake him out of sleep.” Vs 13: “Howbeit Jesus spoke of his death...”
 54.—Acts 7:60—“When he had said this he fell asleep.” [Stephen]
 55.—Acts 13:36—“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep.” (See also 1 Kings 2:10 which would accord with Acts 2:34 that “David is not yet ascended into heaven.”)
 56.—1 Cor. 7:39—“The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives. But if her husband be dead [asleep]...”
 57.—1 Cor. 11:30—“Many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep.”
 58.—1 Cor. 15:6—“But some are fallen asleep.”
 59.—1 Cor. 15:18—“They also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.”
 60.—1 Cor. 15:20—“But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first-fruits of them that slept.”
 61.—1 Cor. 15:51—“We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed.” (See Job 14:14.)
 62.—Eph. 5:14—“Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead.” (Although this passage does not refer to literal death, sleep and death are used as parallel conceptions)
 63.—1 Thess. 4:13—“Concerning them which are asleep.”
 64.—1 Thess. 4:14—“Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. (Meaning that at the resurrection, God will bring the sleeping saints from the grave just as He brought Jesus from the grave. See Hebrews 13:20.)
 65.—1 Thess. 4:15—“We which are alive and remain shall not precede them which are asleep.”
 66.—1 Thess. 5:10—“Our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us that whether we wake or sleep we should live together with Him.” (Meaning that believers who are dead and those who are alive would meet the Lord at the same time when He returned. This seems to have been to correct an error that those who were alive when the Lord returned would have some priority over those who had died.)
 67.—2 Pet. 3:4—“Since the fathers fell asleep.”

The conclusion from the above Scriptures is that sleep is, beyond all question, the established Biblical term for man’s state in death. The reference covers 17 books of the Bible and refers to both good men and bad men being asleep in the grave.

Scripture teaching the state and location of the dead

1.—Job 3:17–18—“There [in the sleep of death – v. 13] the wicked cease from troubling and the weary be at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they know not the voice of the oppressor.”

2.—Psalm 6:5—“For in death there is no remembrance of Thee: in the grave who shall give thanks?”

3.—Psalm 146:4—“His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in the very day his thoughts perish.”

4.—Eccl. 9:5–10—“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for their memory of them is forgotten. Whatsoever thy hand finds to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goes.”

5.—John 5:28—“The hour is coming in the which all that are in the grave shall come forth, they that have done good unto the *resurrection* of life and they that have done evil unto the *resurrection* of damnation.”

From the above Scriptures we conclude that the dead sleep in the graves in an unconscious state awaiting the *resurrection*.

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