THE DOCTRINE OF "SOUL SLEEP"

Is It Biblical?

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Is "Soul Sleep" a Biblical Doctrine?

The doctrine of "soul sleep" is taught in some cults (notably the Jehovah's Witnesses) and some sects of Christianity (notably Seventh Day Adventists). In a nutshell, the doctrine states that when the body dies, one's soul does not immediately go to a conscious existence either with or apart from God, but rather it "sleeps" within the dead body until the resurrection, when body and soul are raised together.

Basis of the Doctrine

On what do proponents of soul sleep base this doctrine? There are certainly scriptures that, at least at first blush, would seem to support it. For example, David said in Psalms 6:5, 30:9, and 115:17 that the dead cannot praise the Lord, and in Isaiah 38:18 King Hezekiah echoes this. However, does that mean that the soul does not retain consciousness after death? I would submit that these men are affirming that upon physical death, one's ability to praise God before men on this earth is ended. Further, we must understand that the afterlife was not fully revealed at this point in history, but was part of the great mystery of the gospel that even the prophets and angels did not previously fully understand (1 Peter 1:10-12).

One of the "big gun" passages used to support soul sleep is from the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter 9, verse 5 reads:

"For the living know that they will die, but the dead don't know anything. There is no longer a reward for them because the memory of them is forgotten."

Let's look a little closer at that last line. It does not say "their memory" is forgotten, but rather "the memory of them is forgotten." Many have died who are not remembered on earth anymore--but that in no way proves that they do not have a consciousness in another place. And what does the very next verse say?

"Their love, their hate, and their envy have already disappeared, and there is no longer a portion for them in all that is done under the sun."

Clearly, the author (King Solomon) is speaking from an earthly perspective. In fact, early on he points out that this is the perspective of the entire book. Ecclesiastes 1:3 reads:

"What does a man gain for all his efforts that he labors at under the sun?"

And verse 9 of chapter one states:
"there is nothing new under the sun."

Ecclesiastes 12:7 is often used as a proof text for soul sleep:

"the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it"

It seems to me it proves just the opposite--the body returns to dust while the spirit returns to God!

Proponents of soul sleep also cite many of the verses in the New Testament that use the term "asleep" or "fallen asleep" when referring to the dead as proof of their doctrine. However, read in context, in every case it is clear that this is simply a euphemism for physical death, used to point out that we are only temporarily--not permanently--separated from our deceased loved ones.

**Refutation of the Doctrine**

There is more than a little very strong scriptural support for consciousness following physical death.

**The Transfiguration**

In Matthew 17:1–9, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28–36, we see an event where Jesus and His inner circle of Peter, James, and John are suddenly joined by Moses and Elijah, who have been physically dead for thousands of years! Yet there they are, conversing with Jesus in front of witnesses, an event that Peter states in 1 Peter 2:16-19 "strongly confirms" the prophetic word of Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

**Teaching of Jesus**

*Anyone in Me will Never Die!*

Jesus taught that those who believe in Him will never face death. He said this in John 8:51:

"I assure you: If anyone keeps My word, he will never see death--ever!"

He repeated it in John 11:25-26:

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die--ever."
Every one of the people who heard Jesus state this has died physically. The person who recorded it and everyone who has read it down through time until now, with the exception of those of us still within our allotted earthly years, has died physically. Every single one, even those who believed and kept His word!

So, is our Lord a liar? Was He mistaken? No. He was speaking spiritually. The spirit of every person that believes in Him will never die. Their spirits continue to live, even though the physical body dies and decays.

Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31)

In this passage, Jesus tells a story of a poor man who dies and goes to Paradise and a rich man who dies and goes to hades. There is debate as to whether this is a parable or a literal picture of the afterlife. Regardless, in this story people who have physically died have consciousness. While on its own it may not make the case against soul sleep, it certainly offers supporting evidence to disprove it.

Not the God of the Dead but of the Living (Luke 20:38)

Admittedly, the context of this passage is the resurrection, but the principle holds true that God is the God "of the living, because all are living to Him." How can a being, physical, spirit, or otherwise, be said to be "living to God" if it has no consciousness--no existence?

Thief on the Cross (Luke 23:43)

If I had no other passage in Scripture, this would be enough to convince me that soul sleep is not an accurate biblical doctrine. Knowing that both He and the repentant thief would be physically dead soon, Jesus said encouragingly,

"I assure you: Today you will be with Me in paradise."

How do adherents of the soul sleep doctrine get around this? They use creative punctuation. They say the text should read, "I assure you today: you will be with Me in paradise."

I am of the opinion that this is a weak and contrived argument. It seems clear from the English as well as the Greek that Jesus is saying, "You will be with me in paradise this day."
In 2 Corinthians 5, the Apostle Paul was very clear that he believed being physically dead meant being with the Lord in spirit. In verses 1-3, he states:

"if our temporary, earthly dwelling is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands. Indeed, we groan in this body, desiring to put on our dwelling from heaven, since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked."

This "earthly dwelling" he speaks of is the physical body. He says if that gets destroyed, we have another "dwelling" (some type of spirit body) that is eternal and built by God. He does not say that we have to wait until the resurrection to be "awakened" and made aware that we are with God.

In verses 6-8 he states:

"we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord," and "we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord."

That is very straightforward: If we are in the body we are not present with the Lord, but if we are out of our bodies (physically dead), we are present with the Lord.

Philippians 1:21-24 sheds even more light on this:

"For me, living is Christ and dying is gain. Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose. I am pressured by both. I have the desire to depart and be with Christ--which is far better--but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you."

Here Paul very clearly states that if he departs (physical death), it is "far better." Far better than what? Far better than continuing fruitful work for the cause of Christ. "Soul sleeping" is hardly far better than winning souls, is it?

Furthermore, why is it far better to depart? Because it means he will "be with Christ"; not lying unconscious underground, but "with Christ."

It is a great gain to be apart from this fallen body on this fallen planet in order to be with Christ. Remaining dormant in this fallen body on this fallen planet when one could be alive and winning souls is not better at all!
**Teaching of Peter**

Paul is not alone in teaching that soul consciousness is retained after physical death. In 1 Peter 3:18-20 he writes:

"For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring you to God, after being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm. In that state He also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison who in the past were disobedient, when God patiently waited in the days of Noah while an ark was being prepared. In it a few--that is, eight people--were saved through water."

"Being put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm" clearly denotes the spirit is alive and conscious after physical death. It is also clear that Jesus didn't make his victorious proclamation to people who were "souls sleeping," and therefore unable to hear and understand His message--He proclaimed to the conscious spirits of those who were disobedient in the past in their physical lives on this earth.

**Teaching in Hebrews**

The author of Hebrews gives us what has come to be called "The Faith Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11. He begins by listing off a number of the Old Testament saints specifically and then states that there isn't time to name them all, but there were many who endured horrendous persecution and martyrdom, yet remained true to and were approved by their faith. He then begins chapter 12 (and keep in mind that the chapter and verse divisions did not exist in the original writings--this was one contiguous train of thought) by saying this:

"Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us . . ."

Who comprises this great cloud of witnesses? The context makes it clear that he is referring to the heroes of the faith who have gone before and been martyred before they saw the promise (the Messiah in whom they hoped) fulfilled. Does it sound like all those martyred heroes are unconscious within their dead corpses? How would they be able to witness anything if that were the case? No, we are surrounded by "witnesses," those who are surrounding us and bearing witness not only to their own records, but to ours as well.

The writer goes on to say in verses 22-23:

"Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly
Jerusalem), to myriads of angels in festive gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to God who is the Judge of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect."

The saved who have gone before are assembled in heaven with the angels. "The spirits of righteous people made perfect" welcome us into the fold when we accept Christ. Unconscious and unaware corpses do not assemble and reside in heaven. Nowhere in Scripture are we told, "You have come to the sleeping souls of those who wait to be awakened to witness and assemble."

**Examples in Revelation**

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the people slaughtered because of God's word and the testimony they had. They cried out with a loud voice: "Lord, the One who is holy and true, how long until You judge and avenge our blood from those who live on the earth?" So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were going to be killed just as they had been." (Revelation 6:9-11)

Here is another example of a passage that can stand alone to show that there is, in fact, conscious existence in the spirit after physical death. The spirits of the saints martyred during the tribulation are aware that they have been persecuted and murdered, they can speak and reason, they can receive robes, and they can rest and wait. These are not the actions and interactions of unconscious beings in limbo.

Revelation 7 supports this, as it describes a vast multitude, prior to the Second Coming of Christ, standing before His throne and worshiping Him. In verses 14-15, one of the elders in heaven explains to John who these people are:

"These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and they serve Him day and night in His sanctuary."

An unaware soul residing in its dead body cannot serve Christ day and night in His sanctuary. For that to happen, these people, while physically dead, MUST be self-aware, conscious, and able to move, think, and act.
CONCLUSION

Based on the whole of scripture it seems clear (to this author, at least), that the doctrine of "soul sleep" is not a biblical doctrine.

Is it a heresy? I don't know that I would go that far. In my opinion, it is an error, but not a heresy. It does not deny the essential tenets of the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, etc. I believe a person can be a truly born again believer and subscribe to the doctrine of soul sleep, but I believe that person would be in error in that regard. It is not something to divide over, but I do believe it is something to correct, as it contradicts the clearly taught biblical principle that to be dead physically is to be with the Lord spiritually.

May the Holy Spirit lead, guide and illuminate as you study God’s Word and decide for yourself whether soul sleep is a biblically correct doctrine.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Before becoming a full-time pastor, Scott was a world-renowned professional magician for over two decades. He was a contributing columnist to a number of trade publications and websites, and has written over three dozen instructional books for magicians that continue to sell well. He still performs his comedy magic and ventriloquism shows when time allows.

Scott has been married to his wife Kristi since 1991. After 20 years of a childless marriage, God miraculously blessed them with the adoption of a newborn baby boy, Josiah Scott Guinn, born on October 12, 2011. The adoption was finalized on December 15, 2011. Josiah’s birth mother originally intended to abort him, but God intervened at the last moment and she changed her mind.

Scott maintains a website and blog, “Small-Time Pastor, BIG-TIME God!” at http://smalltimepastor.com/