

Death, as an unconscious sleep

Death is described as a sleep in the Bible. Would this not imply complete unconsciousness until the resurrection?

Those who advocate a conscious, disembodied, post-mortem state for the deceased between death and the resurrection, usually have to deal with proponents of psychopannychy, more commonly known as “soul sleep.” Psychopannychists believe that between death and the resurrection, the human person exists in a completely unconscious state. They often claim strong support for this from a variety of Biblical passages that describe the deceased as existing in a condition of “sleep.” These include, but are not limited to:

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2, NASU).

“Consider *and* answer me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes, or I will sleep the *sleep of death*” (Psalm 13:3, NASU).

“This He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep’” (John 11:11, NASU).

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51, NASU).

“For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Yeshua” (1 Thessalonians 4:14, NASU).¹

Does the description of the deceased as “sleeping” really mean complete unconsciousness? It should certainly go without saying that it is *entirely inappropriate* to equate any human death labeled as “sleep” as being the same as putting an animal suffering great pain, “to sleep.” It should also not escape our notice that when people go to sleep every night, they are most always not entirely unconscious; for the most part those who get a normal 6-8 hours of sleep at night are semi-conscious, experiencing a degree of either dreaming and/or other mental activity. Among people today when they use colloquial expressions like “I want to go to sleep and not wake up,” it does at all mean that they desire to fall asleep and just die, as much as it means that people do not want insomnia and they want to get a full night’s rest. Likewise, with any living person in a condition of “rest” today, in largely being just inactive or trying to do very little in terms of activity, such a state of “rest” can by no means be used as a support for complete unconsciousness. Sitting on a lounge chair near a beach or a pool, in an exotic location—“resting”—by no means requires a total *unawareness* of one’s surroundings.

What is the vantage point of “sleep” for the deceased really intended to convey to other living persons, especially survivors of those who have lost a loved one? Might a description of sleep actually be intended to imply that a deceased person’s body or mortal remains—while currently inactive or dormant—will one day be active again? Frequently, those who believe in a temporary, disembodied afterlife respond to psychopannychists’ claim that the deceased being “asleep” must mean unconsciousness, by saying that only a deceased person’s *body* is asleep. In the anthropology of Hellenistic or Platonic dualism, the human body was often perceived as the prison for the human soul, and the body was to be cast off at the time of death as a one-time lodging for a person—often as trash or garbage to be thrown away (sometimes cremated and scattered into the wind). In an anthropology of holistic dualism, the mortal remains of someone are to be interred in an honorable manner in either a cemetery,

¹ To these passages can be added: 1 Kings 2:10; 11:43; 14:31; Matthew 27:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20; 2 Peter 3:4.

crypt, or burial vault, and at the time of resurrection they will be reanimated with the departed consciousness returning to the body.

Those who believe in a temporary disembodied afterlife have always been aware of the various passages in Scripture that describe death as a “sleep.” The clear challenge is that the psychopannychist or “soul sleep” advocate prefers to set one set of Biblical passages against another. Those verses that imply some degree of post-mortem, disembodied conscious activity for the deceased in another dimension (i.e., Isaiah 14:9-10; Luke 16:23-31; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 6:9) have to either be allegorized or ignored. In many cases, psychopannychists can be shown in pitting one selection of Biblical passages against another, a fairly typical liberal hermeneutic (one which often takes place in the debate like that over homosexuality). Responsible, conservative interpreters are called to hold the integrity of *all Biblical passages* together. J.A. Motyer is right to assert, “the ‘sleep’ metaphor must be balanced by those other descriptions which imply a conscious, living state,”² after the time of a person’s death and before resurrection.

While advocates of soul sleep are keen to ignore or radically rework the implication of verses such as “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8, NASU), or “I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for *that* is very much better” (Philippians 1:23, NASU), those who believe in a temporary, disembodied afterlife—especially for the redeemed in Heaven—before the resurrection, do not so easily try to dismiss the various passages describing death as “sleep.” In the estimation of N.T. Wright,

“Though [death] is sometimes described as sleep, we shouldn’t take this to mean that it is a state of unconsciousness. Had Paul thought that, I very much doubt that he would have described life immediately after death as ‘being with Christ, which is far better’ [Philippians 1:23]. Rather, *sleep* here means that the *body* is ‘asleep’ in the sense of ‘dead,’ while the real person—however we want to describe him or her—continues.”³

Wright also observes how,

“[S]ome interpreters...speak of ‘the sleep of the soul’, a time of unconscious post-mortem existence prior to the reawakening of the resurrection....In fact, if we were speaking strictly, we should say that it is the *body* that ‘sleeps’ between death and resurrection; but in all probability Paul is using the language of sleeping and waking simply as a way of contrasting a state of temporary inactivity, not necessarily unconsciousness, with a subsequent one of new activity.”⁴

Principally, the description of death being like “sleep” is to largely serve as comfort to a survivor who has lost a loved one. When the corpse of a family member or friend is viewed (at least for identification purposes) for the final time before internment (frequently by the custom of “visitation”), the deceased person’s body is to be still very much be treated as “him” or “her,” even though the consciousness has left for another dimension (*hopefully* being with the Lord in Heaven). Realizing that a body is “asleep,” should cause those who are left behind to treat it with great respect and dignity, as such a body will most certainly live again at the resurrection! The closest that any survivor can get to a departed loved one is, after all, his or her burial site in a cemetery.

In terms of what a deceased person actually does after death, in a disembodied condition in another dimension, the Scriptures tell us very little about. Various clues present in the Word do suggest that the deceased do exist in some kind of restful or semi-conscious mode. When the spirit of Samuel is called up from the netherworld, Samuel’s statement “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” (1 Samuel 28:15, NASU), is an indication that while in Sheol he was doing very little, although he was not totally unaware of his surroundings. Likewise, when the departed king of Babylon is cast out of his tomb and into Sheol, he is told, “Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come, it rouses the shades to greet you” (Isaiah 14:9, RSV). The various kings who preceded the Babylonian monarch in death are not unconscious, but neither are they as active as they would have been on Earth during their reigns. Even in the account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, the righteous deceased in Abraham’s bosom do not seem to be doing that much, although they are in a conscious condition of rest and refreshment and pleasantness.

All of this should lead us to conclude that while a deceased person’s body or mortal remains are “asleep” somewhere on Earth until the resurrection, the departed consciousness of the deceased are likely in some kind of semi-conscious condition—but not one where all activity and contemplation have ceased. The observation

² J.A. Motyer, *After Death: What Happens When You Die?* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 107.

³ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 171.

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 216.

of Qohelet is, “for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10, NASU), principally because all of the Earth-bound opportunities to work, plan for a future, receive an education, and become wise via experience will all *be over*. This is precisely because the deceased “will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:6, NASU), meaning life on Earth. Whether one goes to an intermediate Heaven or Hell prior to the resurrection, neither the righteous or unrighteous have to work to make a living for themselves, or hold down a job to pay bills. Bruce Milne’s observations concur that this involves,

“[R]est from labour, easing of responsibility, abstraction from immediate involvement in events, a different kind of awareness and, perhaps most important of all, the certainty of reawakening at a future point. While not saying everything, it draws attention to the relative passivity of the intermediate state.”⁵

Why psychopannychists strongly insist, if not contentiously protest sometimes, that death is an unconscious sleep—when there are various Biblical examples available of post-mortem, disembodied conscious activity—is largely unknown. We cannot fully ascertain their spiritual motives, if they truly are Believers in Yeshua, why when they die do they not want to be immediately transported into the presence of the Messiah in Heaven?⁶ Theologically speaking, though, when psychopannychists strongly insist that death is a completely unconscious sleep until the resurrection, and that humans are entirely physical beings with no compositional connection to another dimension, it is easy to see that they are not as careful as they should be in supplying various “proof texts” for their position. Some of the passages provided to support that “death is an unconscious sleep” can actually be interpreted as being *anti-resurrection*, the very doctrine that they think they are trying to defend:

“By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19, NASU).

“So man lies down and does not rise. Until the heavens are no longer, he will not awake nor be aroused out of his sleep. Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, that You would conceal me until Your wrath returns *to You*, that You would set a limit for me and remember me!” (Job 14:12-13, NASU).

“Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not return” (Psalm 78:39, NASU).

“When they become heated up, I will serve *them* their banquet and make them drunk, that they may become jubilant and may sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake up,’ declares the LORD. I will bring them down like lambs to the slaughter, like rams together with male goats” (Jeremiah 51:39-40, NASU).

No advocate of “soul sleep,” who to their strong credit does affirm a doctrine of future bodily resurrection, would say that a claim such as, “people are laid to rest and do not rise again” (Job 14:15, NLT) or “sleep forever [*sh’nat-olam*, שְׁנַת־עוֹלָם] and not awake” (Jeremiah 51:39, NIV), are definitive statements to be read isolated from the remainder of the Scriptures. If taken by itself, a passage like Jeremiah 51:39 *could* be read as being anti-resurrection. But in this case, the fact that Babylon is the subject (Jeremiah 51:37), and its judgment is in view, needs to be kept in mind. Likewise, what is likely to suffer from a never-ending sleep is the Babylonian Empire, as opposed to the individuals in the Babylonian army, its aristocracy, or its royal court. Still, the point should be taken that a simplistic reading of Scripture passages is not warranted, as those who believe in a disembodied afterlife prior to the resurrection have not just picked through passages that support their position, while ignoring verses that describe death as a condition of “sleep.”

Those who are sincerely convicted that the Bible teaches a conscious, disembodied intermediate state between death and the resurrection, are aware of how many details are *not* given to us of this time (aside from being with the Lord like 2 Corinthians 5:8 or Philippians 1:23, or returning with the Lord from Heaven like 1 Thessalonians 3:13). *Specific* factors of the intermediate state not communicated to us are not at all to be interpreted as some kind of a denial of it, but are to support the reality that individuals living on Planet Earth today serving God, are to reach out *in total faith* toward Him—in both prayer and action—and are largely prohibited to contemplate what their deceased loved ones who knew Him are presently doing in Heaven (cf. Leviticus 20:27;

⁵ Bruce Milne, *The Message of Heaven & Hell* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 172.

⁶ Be sure to consult the FAQ, “Afterlife, negates need for resurrection.”

Deuteronomy 18:11), other than being a part of the company of appeal that demands a soon return of Yeshua to the Earth (cf. Revelation 6:9-10).

To a degree, the condition of our departed loved ones in Heaven might be semi-conscious, because for the redeemed it is to certainly be a period of rest and refreshment (cf. Luke 23:43). For the righteous, the intermediate condition of their bodies or mortal remains is something akin to “sleeping” on Earth, and it is surely also not to be a time of “work” in Heaven. In our limited human language, our departed loves ones who knew the Lord and are presently with Him in Heaven, are—for lack of better terminology—probably on a kind of “extended vacation.” When the Scriptures describe death as a “sleep” for Messiah followers, it is with the expressed intention to demonstrate that God is not at all finished with the human body or mortal remains, and that such a body will surely be awakened and reanimated at the time of the Messiah’s return.

This should not only encourage those who have to deal with the death of a loved one to treat his or her corpse with respect, but also recognize—above all else—that the return of Yeshua to the Earth not only insures survivors that they will be able to embrace the body of a loved one again, **but that all of the physical promises of a restored Israel will be accomplished.** More than anything else, the future resurrection of the dead is proof that the Lord Yeshua’s Millennial Kingdom will establish Jerusalem as the capital of Planet Earth, defeating all of Israel’s enemies, *and* that Messiah followers will not just move from death to a pleasant and peaceful condition in His presence after death, with nothing else to really follow.