

Death, for Believers

What do you believe happens when born again Believers die?

We believe that the disembodied consciousnesses of Believers who die in the faith are transported to Heaven to be with the Lord. This is fully consistent with what the Apostles write to us in the Messianic Scriptures and the beliefs of First Century Pharisaical Judaism, which largely advocated an intermediate afterlife prior to the resurrection. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:8, “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (NASU). The Greek verb that Paul uses for “be at home with,” *endēmeō* (ἐνδημέω), actually means “To be at home, to be present in any place or with any person,” relating to “one who is at home with...or among his own people” (AMG).¹ Being separated from one’s physical body thus requires a Believer to be present with the Lord.

Paul also writes in Philippians 1:23, “But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for *that* is very much better” (NASU), but expressing his need to remain on Earth a little longer to perform the Lord’s work. Further on in this same epistle, Paul writes that “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Yeshua the Messiah” (Philippians 3:20, NASU). He wants to die and be in the presence of His Savior, yet clearly recognizes how Yeshua will ultimately come to restore the Earth. The Believer’s ultimate place of residence is not a Heaven far off in the sky, but in the restored Kingdom of God on Earth. Heaven is the intermediate place to be with the Lord prior to the resurrection of a Believer’s body.

As a ministry, we fully denounce any form of “soul sleep” for the righteous, as it is only the Believer’s dead body that is “asleep,” awaiting for reunification with the consciousness at the resurrection. **We fully affirm the reality of a bodily resurrection!** An intermediate afterlife assures us beyond any doubt that the person who is resurrected, is the same authentic person who had lived a life on Earth—and not some replica or facsimile of the person.

Those in the Messianic community who believe in “soul sleep” often base it on half-verses such as Ecclesiastes 9:5b, which says “the dead do not know anything” (NASU). Yet this is not definitive evidence of no conscious afterlife, as the verse continues describing human life on Earth, and how the dead do not know of any Earth-bound things: “their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5c-6, NASU). Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 does not say anything about the condition of dead persons or where they are, but instead lists specific things that they cannot do because they are dead. These are things that these people had time to participate in on Earth or “under the sun” (Heb. *tachat ha’shamesh*, תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ), but cannot participate in beyond the veil of death, hence not “knowing” about them.

It is insufficient for any interpreter, as can be quite commonplace among Messianic advocates of “soul sleep,” to only consider references in the Tanach without also weighing them with statements in the Apostolic Scriptures. The Tanach really does not even ask the question about life after death, because it is more widely concerned with the *corporate* nature of God’s people and their conduct on Earth, whereas questions of an afterlife are widely *individualistic*. Because the Tanach does not really ask the question, it is not addressed to the same degree as it is in the Apostolic Scriptures. But still, that does not mean that the Tanach is entirely silent about an afterlife. One cannot really “die,” and then be “gathered to his people” (Genesis 25:8; 35:29; 49:33; Numbers 20:24, 26; Deuteronomy 32:50), unless one is gathered *somewhere*. It by no means speaks exclusively of internment in a family tomb. When Jacob died, he “was gathered to his people” (Genesis 49:33), but he was not actually buried for quite some time (Genesis 50:2-14). Moses is said to have been “gathered to your people” (Deuteronomy 32:50),

¹ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 585.

but he was interred in an unmarked gravesite (Deuteronomy 34:6), certainly not being united with his ancestors' remains in a family tomb.

There are certainly strong clues given in the Tanach of a temporary, disembodied state as one of the "shades" in Sheol or the netherworld (i.e., Isaiah 14:9).

The development of a theology of afterlife across the Biblical period is no more irregular or strange than the development of Messianism, which took multiple millennia (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2), or even the doctrine of resurrection itself which is scantily alluded to *directly* in the Tanach (Daniel 12:1-2). All three of these strata largely came to their peak in Pharisaic Judaism, which significantly affected the development of the early Messianic movement.

For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author's publications ***To Be Absent From the Body*** and ***Why Hell Must Be Eternal***. Also recommended are the books *Death and the Afterlife* by Robert A. Morey, and *Bible, Soul & Life Everlasting* by John W. Cooper.