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What Is The Doctrine of Soul Sleep? Is It Biblical?

Posted By *Dr. Michael L. Williams* On January 21, 2015 @ 5:00 am In Christian Answers | [14 Comments](#)

People have differing views on what happens after they die. Sadly, many people also have no problem with killing someone because they disagree with their view about what will happen after they are dead. History has proven that Christians have often been the victims of this wickedness. Sadly, a large number of them were victims at the hands of others who called themselves Christians. One doctrine that continues to create debate in Christian circles is the doctrine of soul sleep. For this reason, we will ask and answer what is the doctrine of soul sleep and is it Biblical?

What is soul sleep?

Soul sleep is the concept that when someone dies, their soul goes to sleep in a sort of suspended animation. The person has no awareness, consciousness, nor unconscious activity. Instead, they are "asleep" and waiting for the day when they wake up. There are few denominations that believe this and they do not usually refer to it as soul sleep. Instead they often refer to this concept as "the state of the dead."



[1]

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Where did the doctrine of soul sleep originate?

The concept of soul sleep became popular with some Christians in the 1830s. It came from a doctrine taught by Arnobius of Sicca in a book called *Against the Pagans* that was written about

305 A.D. Arnobius taught that souls could not exist without a body unless God divinely preserved the soul for eternity. Likewise, he taught that the souls of wicked (unbelievers) go to the fires of Hell (Gehenna) where they are ultimately consumed or annihilated.

In 1841, a Methodist preacher named George Storrs wrote a tract and published six sermons on this concept of annihilationism based on a tract he read that was written by a Baptist deacon by the name of Henry Grew in 1837. At the same time, there was a movement started by a man named William Miller that tried to predict the second coming of Christ. They did this by assigning dates to certain Biblical prophecies and predicted Jesus would return in the fall of 1844. Storrs was drawn to the group, known as the Millerites, and became a preacher in the movement.

Once, it was shown that the Second Coming or Advent prediction failed, the group split up. Out of that group came the 7th Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses [2]. William Miller did not embrace this teaching, however both groups had publications and leaders that originated from the original Millerite movement that embraced the idea of annihilation and soul sleep.

With the failed predictive prophecies, they adopted instead a doctrine that an "investigative judgment" started in 1844. This taught that all who had died were waiting to be judged whether or not they would go to heaven or be preserved until the end times to be destroyed by fire. The idea of someone going to heaven at the moment of death was replaced by the idea that their souls were asleep until it was their turn for judgment and that there is no Hell or lake of fire.

Unfortunately, the 1844 "Great Disappointment," as it was known to those who sold everything and waited in vain on their rooftops for Christ's return, was replaced by a greater disappointment when the investigative judgment took a little longer than anticipated. Today, this doctrine is still taught as doctrine number 26 of the Seventh Day Adventist's 28 fundamental beliefs publication (1). It is also taught as the doctrine of the condition of the dead by Jehovah's Witnesses (2) (3).

Is the doctrine of soul sleep Biblical?

When it comes to soul sleep, we must look to the Bible to see if a soul can exist apart from the body. The Bible tells us that the soul and spirit can be separated from the body as follows:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

This verse tells us that the Word of God, like a cutting sword, can separate the soul and spirit from the joints and marrow (body). This is evidenced by Revelation 6:9-10 and Revelation 20:4 where we see the souls of those who were martyred for their faith, crying out God's judgment against those who killed them.

Some would say that this was after the resurrection [3], so they did have bodies. However, this

does not account for the time when these souls were brought with Jesus from heaven to be reunited with their perfected immortal bodies that were resurrected (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Those asleep in Christ are those who had died as believers and were in the presence of Christ in Heaven. At the moment of the resurrection, they will come with Him from Heaven to be reunited with their new celestial bodies (1 Corinthians 15:39-57).

The idea of being in Heaven after death was realized by both Stephen and Paul. Stephen spoke of it while suffering persecution at the hands of local Jews. The very mentioning of this infuriated the Jews so much they killed him (Acts 7:54-60). During this event he had a clear vision of Jesus standing on the right hand of God. As the Jews stoned him, just before he died, he called upon God, saying, "*Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit.*" It is clear from his words that he knew he would be with Christ when he died despite his body being dead.

Paul reinforced this in 2 Corinthians 5 while explaining that we have earthly bodies (tabernacles) and are awaiting our heavenly bodies. He speaks of our anticipation with confidence that while we are at home in our earthly body, we are absent from the Lord, but would rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:5-8).

As believers, whether we are in our bodies on earth or in heaven, we are part of God's family (Galatians 3:26). Paul made specific mention of this in Ephesians 3:14-15 when he described praying on his "*knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ of whom the whole family in HEAVEN AND EARTH is named*" (emphasis added). The family in heaven and earth that have the name of Jesus is believers in heaven and earth. This is also seen in Ephesians 1:9-10 when referring to the reunion that will take place at the resurrection between those in heaven and on earth.

If there are no souls awake in heaven, then we would have to wonder where Enoch and Elijah went when God took them (Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). Likewise, Lazarus' experience of being carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom in Paradise and the rich man's torment in the flames of hell would be a lie that Jesus told to illustrate a false doctrine (Luke 16:19-31). If there are no souls alive after death, then Jesus lied to the repentant thief that he would be with Him in Paradise that day (Luke 24:43). Sadly, those who teach that souls do not exist after death reposition punctuation marks and teach verses out of context to redefine the clear teaching of these verses.

The Bible teaches there is a literal hell that will deliver up the unjust dead at the Great White Throne Judgment and they will be thrown in the lake of fire to be tormented forever with the Devil and his angels (Revelation 14:9-11; Revelation 19:19-21; Revelation 20; Revelation 21:8). Likewise, death and hell will be then thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14) in anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:1-5).

Conclusion

Soul sleep is the concept that when someone dies, their soul goes to sleep. It is based on a doctrine that teaches that the soul does not exist apart from the body and is annihilated with the destruction of the body. Soul sleep is taught by groups that originated as part of the Millerite movement of the 1840's. Their teaching of soul sleep contradicts Scripture, making it not Biblical.

Related reading: [Do Christians Go Immediately to Heaven After They Die?](#) [4]

Resources – Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, King James Version. (1) "28 Fundamental Beliefs". Seventh Day Adventist Church: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Retrieved from: <http://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/28Beliefs-Web.pdf>. (2013). (2) "Soul". Watchtower Online Library: Insight, Volume 2. Retrieved from: <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1200004192>. (2014). (3) "Condition of the Dead". Watchtower Online Library: Insight, Volume 1, pp 596-599. Retrieved from <http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/1200001136#h=8:0-9:953>. (2014)

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[1] Image: **<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/What-Is-The-Doctrine-of-Soul-Sleep.jpg>**

[2] Jehovah's Witnesses: **<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/what-do-jehovahs-witnesses-believe/>**

[3] the resurrection: **<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/the-significance-of-the-resurrection-jesus-arose-where-he-died/>**

[4] Do Christians Go Immediately to Heaven After They Die?:
<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/do-christians-go-immediately-to-heaven-after-they-die/>

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