

Becky Bereans – Death and Resurrection – Session 9

Session 9

Review

Last time, we talked about Hell – The Eternal Punishment of the Lost. The main Scriptures we considered in that discussion were Matthew 25 – Jesus’ teaching about the sheep and the goats, and Revelation 20 – John’s description of the final judgment at the Great White Throne. We concluded that Hell is indeed a literal place or state of eternal punishment, and that God can be loving and merciful while also being holy and just, because He has ceded to man the right to choose our eternal state through Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross and His resurrection.

The Consciousness of the Soul After Death

So now we come at last to the question that first led us into this series on Death and Resurrection – whether our souls continue “alive and alert” after bodily death, or whether they either cease to exist altogether or continue in some suspended state (“soul sleep”) until our bodies are eventually resurrected. As with the other difficult questions we have tackled so far in this series, we’re likely to find that the various conflicting views that have been presented over the years all have some Biblical basis. So, before we launch into our discussion, let’s remember the Golden Rule of Hermeneutics:

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

Dr. David L. Cooper

Furthermore, we must surely understand that our salvation in Christ depends solely on our genuine belief in His resurrection and our humble devotion to His lordship, not on our conclusions about this question. That’s good, because in all humility we must accept that we are unlikely to find any hard and fast conclusions in our brief discussion of a question which many greater minds than our own have debated for centuries. So, with those things understood let’s muck in.

History of the Soul Sleep Idea

As Dr. Strauss points out, the idea of so-called “soul sleep” is not a new one. Yet, neither is it altogether ancient. Dr. Michael Williams wrote a brief history of the idea that is well worth reading. It can be found at - <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/what-is-the-doctrine-of-soul-sleep-is-it-biblical/>. I am also posting a PDF download of this article along with these study notes. Although the idea of soul sleep was first proposed in a book called Against the Pagans written by Arnobius of Sicca around 305AD, the so-called “doctrine” of soul sleep didn’t truly flourish until the early 1800s when an apocalyptic group known as the Millerites fragmented into two factions following the failure of a false prophecy by William Miller that Jesus would return in 1844. Those two factions eventually became what we know today as the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses – both of

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whom teach “soul sleep” among their fundamental beliefs. I must admit I hold a deep personal mistrust of any teaching coming from either of these two sources, but in fairness we must all at least grudgingly admit that just because they teach something doesn’t make it wrong, right? Therefore, let us try to understand their reasoning for these teachings – especially their Biblical basis.

What Exactly Is the Soul Sleep Idea?

The concept of soul sleep arises from a fundamental belief that the body, mind, soul, and spirit of a person are inseparable. Thus, it logically follows that when a person’s body dies, these other facets of our existence must also be fundamentally transformed. We thoroughly examined this topic in our discussion on [Man a Trinity Body Soul Spirit](#). Recall that during that discussion we proposed that mankind bears a triune character similar to that of God Himself in whose image we are created. Furthermore, we postulated that all three of these aspects of our nature are eternal, although we must admit that our present physical body is indeed corruptible and subject to death due to the curse resulting from mankind’s Fall in the Garden of Eden. But during that discussion, we admitted we can’t explain how this so-called “inferior trinity” of mankind can consist of three distinct parts and yet somehow be unified any more than we can explain the triune nature of the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Jesus – God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Then in our session on [Immortality](#) we looked at a very helpful description of three common versions of the soul sleep “doctrine” from Brother Mark on his blog A Matter of Truth – <https://sites.google.com/a/amatteroftruth.com/www/scriptures-that-support-soul-sleep>.

We discussed these three flavors of the soul sleep doctrine in earlier sessions, so we won’t rehash those discussions in any detail. Ignoring for the time being the flaws in Brother Mark’s exposition, and the idea held by most people that man’s soul dies forever with his body, let’s briefly re-examine these theories of soul sleep without making any argument for or against them for the time being.

1. Annihilation of the Soul – This so-called “extreme” theory of soul sleep teaches that the soul of man is utterly destroyed in the moment of bodily death, and that each true believer receives both a new body and soul at the time of the final re-creation in Revelation 21-22, while both the bodies and souls of unbelievers are destroyed in the lake of fire at the Great White Throne judgment of Revelation 20. This “extreme” soul sleep is the version taught by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The scriptures used to support this view come from those two famously enthusiastic and optimistic encouragers – Solomon in his old age, and Job in the midst of his misery:

¹⁹For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return. ²¹Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 [ESV]

For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Ecclesiastes 9:5 [ESV]

¹⁰But a man dies and is laid low;

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man breathes his last, and where is he?

¹¹As waters fail from a lake

and a river wastes away and dries up,

¹²so a man lies down and rises not again;

till the heavens are no more he will not awake

or be roused out of his sleep. Job 14:10-12 [ESV]

2. Unconscious Soul Sleep – This version of the soul sleep idea holds that the soul remains with the body after bodily death until the resurrection of the body. For believers, that will be at the time of the rapture of the church. For non-believers it will be at the Great White Throne. In this less extreme version of the theory, the soul is not utterly destroyed by bodily death. Thus, no new soul is required at the resurrection. However, in the interim between bodily death and resurrection, the soul is utterly hibernating – wholly unconscious of anything either inside or outside the grave. Obviously, the scriptures used to justify the “Extreme” soul sleep theory and this one are the same.
3. General Soul Sleep – This idea holds that in the instant of bodily death, the soul and body are separated. The souls of believers are then present with the LORD, while the souls of unbelievers reside in a temporary holding area called Sheol – שְׁאוֹל *š’ol* in the Old Testament and ᾗδης *hades* in the New. Most Christians in all honesty might admit they adhere mostly to this belief (ignoring Brother Mark’s erroneous statement about white robes which clearly applies only to Tribulation martyrs). But as Brother Mark correctly points out, we don’t really call it “soul sleep” for fear of being identified as “those” people.

So, What About Soul Sleep Idea Then?

Obviously, those of us who discredit the idea of soul sleep can point to any number of scriptures that would seem to support our position. The story of the thief on the cross, and Paul’s writing in 2 Corinthians 5 about being absent from the body and being present with the LORD spring to mind, as do the stories of the stoning of Stephen and of Jesus’ own death on the cross. Just as the concept of soul sleep (at least the first two flavors we looked at) rests upon the notion that the body, soul, and spirit of mankind are inseparable, so any arguments against the soul sleep idea must rest on the belief that the soul and spirit *may* be separated for a time from the body when it dies.

But our intention here isn’t to make an apologetic either in support of or opposition to soul sleep. Such arguments are preached week-in-week-out from pulpits throughout Christendom, are found in writings all over the Internet, and in countless published works written over the last two centuries (including the chapter from Dr. Strauss’ book Death and Afterward which we are currently studying). There’s little to be gained from delving into what others have said on the subject. Instead, it might be more profitable to simply discuss the subject among ourselves, bringing our own readings and experiences to the forum. As a framework for that discussion, let’s look again at the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus which initially brought us into these discussions:

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his

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sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side [κόλπος kolpos]. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' ²⁵But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' ²⁷And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'” Luke 16:19-31 [ESV]

ASIDE – The Greek word **κόλπος kolpos** is found in Luke 16:22 & 23. It means the front of the body between the arms. Thus, it might better be translated as “chest” or as many translations render it, “bosom” rather than “side” as in the ESV.

Luke 16:22 is rendered into English variously as follows:

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; [KJV]

“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. [NKJV]

“Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, [NLT]

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. [NIV]

“One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. [CSB]

“Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's arms; and the rich man also died and was buried. [NASB 2020]

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GRATUITOUS RANT – Before we begin our discussion let me just take a moment to rail once more against the so-called “swoon” theory that Jesus didn’t actually die on the cross, but merely passed out, and lay unconscious in the tomb until He awakened and somehow freed Himself. This preposterous idea if true would render the substitutionary atonement of Jesus’ death on the cross moot. Jesus having never actually died was never resurrected, and you and I are still dead in our sins without any hope of rescue out of death. We are therefore what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “of all men the most pitiable.” If I might put this as gently as possible, **Jesus no more merely “swooned” on the cross than the souls of the dead are destroyed or are essentially lifeless alongside our dead bodies in the grave.**

Discussion Questions

1. What do you make of the idea of Annihilation of the Soul?
2. How about Unconscious Soul Sleep?
3. Assuming we reject the other “flavors” of the soul sleep “doctrine,” if we’re honest with ourselves, do we have to acknowledge General Soul Sleep as true and Biblically supported even though we don’t call it “Soul Sleep” (disregarding Brother Mark’s faulty exegesis)?
4. What are your Biblical bases for these positions?
5. What does the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus tell us about the state of our souls following bodily death?
6. What does the parable **not** tell us?
7. Have any of these discussions changed your thinking on the matter of soul sleep, or do you remain convinced of your previous beliefs?
8. Is there a solid Biblical foundation for closing the subject to debate altogether? If so, what is it?
9. Have these discussions changed your assessment of the importance of the question of soul sleep or not? Why?