

What Happens After You Die: Dealing With Various Texts

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NOTE: *Different versions of the Bible (the New International Version, the King James Version, the New King James Version, etc.) at times translate the same texts using different words. It's thus important to understand that some of the texts dealt with in the study that follows may or may not be problematic in the version of the Bible you personally use. This highlights the fact that even if you're not a Greek or Hebrew scholar, using a variety of good English translations and a good Bible concordance can be very helpful in resolving translation difficulties, particularly with regard to the topic of what happens after you die.*

Now that we've had some time together to study the basics of what the Bible teaches about death, some questions might remain in your mind. Perhaps you've heard that there are a number of texts in the Bible that go against the concept of **soul sleep—that is, that in death, we simply sleep in the grave**. On the other hand, we know that the Bible does not contradict itself. So what are we to make of these “challenging” texts?

I. Some Texts Supporting Soul Sleep

A. First, here again are some of the texts that clearly *support* soul sleep:

- **Genesis 2:7**
- **Genesis 3:19**
- **Job 14:10-12 (compare with II Peter 3:10)**
- **Psalms 6:5/Psalms 115:17**
- **Ecclesiastes 9:5 & 6**
- **Acts 2:29-36**

B. Another text that is also helpful in establishing soul sleep is **John 11** where we find the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Re-read the story, and then note the following points:

1. Why does Jesus cry over Lazarus' death? The text gives us the answer (v.36): “See how He [Jesus] love him [Lazarus]”, not “See how He sympathized with the mourners” or some other reason. In other words, Jesus was experiencing true separation from Lazarus, for Lazarus was dead in the grave. Would Jesus' response have been the same if He believed Lazarus to be rejoicing in the blessings of heaven? Certainly not.
2. If the righteous dead go straight to heaven (as those who teach the soul is immortal often say), how cruel of Christ to yank Lazarus back into his body only to die AGAIN yet another day in the future!

3. It is odd that we don't we have any stories in the New Testament of Lazarus giving great reports of what heaven was like. True, this is an argument from silence. But we must remember that the afterlife was a great point of contention between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, two of the leading religious parties among the Jews. It seems that surely one or the other of them would have gotten the juicy tidbits from Lazarus to prove their point of view. Yet we have no record of this occurring—I would suggest because Lazarus, having not gone to heaven at all, had nothing to share.

C. Some other texts that support soul sleep and that show when God will “wake up” the righteous are:

- **John 5:28-30/Compare with Daniel 12:1 & 2**
- **John 14:1-3**
- **I Thessalonians 4:13-18**
- **I Corinthians 15:51-55**

II. Potentially Challenging Texts

There are some texts in the Bible that seem to contradict this idea of soul sleep (again, depending on which version of the Bible you're using). We will deal with 15 of them below. “Fifteen!” you might say. “If there are as many texts as that, maybe those who teach the soul is immortal are correct!” But the truth is that most of these 15 offer very light-weight opposition to the concept of soul sleep—and they are thus readily disarmed by simple biblical research. And for the handful of texts that do seem to present strong opposition to soul sleep, they too fall into line with soul sleep after a careful studying of the text.

So let's see what we can discover. You'll be amazed at the harmony of God's Word!

NOTE: For each entry below, please read the Bible text in question first (sometimes it will be printed there for you, other times, you'll need to read it for yourself in your own Bible). Then read the comments below it.

A. Genesis 35:18—Rachel's Death

In the King James Version, it reads like this:

“And so it was, as her [Rachel's] soul [Hebrew *nephesh*] was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him 'Benjamin'.”

1. It's the Hebrew word *nephesh*, or “soul”, which can be translated as “life” or “breath” or “soul” depending on the context. But note carefully: To have a “nephesh” is to be the same as the animals (Genesis 1:20 & 30), that is, they and we have “life”. But certainly, no one would intimate or explicitly say that

therefore, because we supposedly have an eternal soul that the animals do as well! Yet the same word is used to describe the composition of both man and animals.

2. The NIV thus translates the same word this way: “As she **breathed** her last—for she was dying—she named her son Ben-Oni....” This is the better translation, as it avoids conflicting with the rest of the Bible’s counsel on what happens at death.

B. I Samuel 28:5-25—Saul and the Witch of Endor

1. First, notice that Saul is breaking an explicit command of God in consulting a medium. It was a capital offense to be a spiritist or a medium (Lev.20:27, for instance), so to believe that God is now going to (if it were possible) allow the *real* Samuel to communicate truth to Saul—the man God had explicitly rejected (I Sam.15:26, 16:1)—is unlikely at best.

2. I Sam.28:13b—Note “Samuel’s” location—that is, where does he come from? Given that Samuel was faithful to God all his life, those that believe in an immortal soul would expect to see him coming *down* from heaven. But instead, he is seen “coming *up*” from the ground...hardly the location of paradise!

3. And note what “Samuel” claims is Saul’s destiny? Verse 19: “...and tomorrow you and your sons will be *with me*.” Samuel was clearly honored of God; heaven is his destiny. But Saul was clearly rejected of God. Are we then to believe that Saul will somehow be in “heaven” with “Samuel” after his impending death? This simply does not make sense.

4. Given the preceding evidence, it’s much more reasonable to believe that an evil spirit was impersonating Samuel, that the real Samuel was dead and resting in the grave, and that Saul was consulting instead with the devil and his minions.

C. **Ps.146:4** “When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing” and **Ecclesiastes 12:7**—“and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit [Hebrew *ruach*] returns to God who gave it.”

1. First, note the parallels between Eccl.12:7 and Genesis 2:7. The writer of Ecclesiastes seems to be recalling the creation account, and thus the parallels between the two are helpful in figuring out what is meant by the “spirit” returning to God.

2. The Hebrew word *ruach* is variously translated as “breath”, “wind”, or “spirit”. In the KJV, *ruach* is translated as the “breath” of the body 33 times (Ezekiel 37:5, etc.); “wind” 117 times (Genesis 8:1, etc.); “spirit” 76 times, in the sense of vitality (Judges 15:19), “courage” (Joshua 2:11), temper or “anger” (Judges 8:3) and in reference to the emotional disposition (Isaiah 54:6). *Ruach* is also used to describe what might be called “the living principle” in men and animals 25 times (Psalm 146:4, etc.); the seat of the emotions 3 times (I Samuel 1:15, etc.); the

“mind” 9 times (Ezekiel 11:5, etc.); will, volition, or “heart” (II Chronicles 29:31) 3 times; moral character 16 times (Ezekiel 11:19, etc.); and the Spirit of God 94 times (Isaiah 63:10, etc.).

But in not one of the 379 instances in which *ruach* is used in the Old Testament does the word denote an intelligent entity capable of existence apart from a physical body (the Spirit of God being the obvious exception to this).

3. Check out **Eccl.3:18-20** as another example of *ruach* usage.

4. For our modern context, the better translation of Ps.146:4 and Eccl.12:7 is to use “breath” instead of “spirit”, as that is in keeping with the rest of the Bible’s teaching on soul sleep. However, “spirit” can also be used acceptably, as long as it is remembered what *ruach* can and cannot mean—that is, that it cannot mean an immortal soul.

5. This word study highlights the great need for constantly being on our guard against inappropriately projecting our preconceptions onto a text.

D. **Matthew 17:1-3—The Transfiguration**

1. This can’t be Moses as a disembodied soul—he’s definitely got a recognizable form, here. AND, he clearly can’t be appearing as a dead person. After all, Christ is the same God who inspired these texts to be written: **Lev.19:31**, **Lev.20:6**; (compare also Lev.20:27); **Isaiah 8:19**. These texts clearly prohibit any contact with the “dead”!

2. But even once we understand this, there is still the potential problem of Moses—having died hundreds of years earlier—being present on the mount of transfiguration. If we are to avoid having the Bible contradict it’s teaching on soul sleep, the only logical option is that Moses, after dying (see Deuteronomy 34:5 & 6), was raised back to life by God and taken to heaven. Is there any indication that this occurred?

Yes! In **Jude 9**, there is a brief but fascinating description of Jesus debating with the devil about Moses’ body. The implication is that the devil did not want God reviving Moses and taking him to heaven—an explanation that allows Matthew 17:1-3 to harmonize well with the rest of the Bible’s teaching on soul sleep.

E. **Luke 8:55**: Jesus raises a girl back to life, “her spirit [Greek *pneuma*] returned” and she sat up. (Also, note a similarly worded text in **James 2:26**: “As the body without the spirit [*pneuma*] is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”)

1. The Greek word *pneuma* can be generally translated as follows: air in motion; the vital principle (“the spirit”); spirit (as in frame of mind, disposition, or influence); God as spirit (the Holy Spirit); evil spirits; etc.

2. Note here that in the New International Version (NIV), the same root word

pneuma is utilized also in **Hebrews 1:7**, yet there, the NIV translates the word as “winds”, not “spirit”. Context is a partial determining factor here, and undoubtedly explains why the New English Bible (NEB) translates James 2:26 as “As the body is dead when there is no *breath* left in it, so faith divorced from deeds is lifeless as a corpse.”

3. These translation variations illustrate how Luke 8:55 and James 2:26 can be readily harmonized with the rest of the Bible’s teaching on soul sleep.

F. Luke 16:19-31—The Rich Man and Lazarus

1. Note that this is a parable—the 8th one since chapter 12! A parable is a *symbolic* story—it didn’t actually happen (though some of Jesus’ parables were rooted in real situations familiar to His listeners). A parable is an object lesson, not an eyewitness account of actual events.

2. However, if one insists on taking the parable as an actual and factual account of real events, then one must be consistent: One cannot pick and choose what is real and what is not.

But such a literal interpretation is filled with difficulty! For if this parable were actually a description of reality, notice what that means:

a. All saints—the righteous who follow Jesus—go to Abraham’s side at death. Let’s hope that Abraham’s side is big enough to hold them all! (In reality, going to “Abraham’s side” was simply a Jewish euphemism for dying.)

b. Hell is in direct site of heaven, and the two sides can communicate with one another. Imagine how terrible this would make heaven, for instance, for a mother whose son was in hell!!! (Add to this that, even though the two places can see each other, no help can be given due to the chasm fixed between the two, and we have a recipe for incredible pain for Heaven’s residents!)

c. Is it not much more reasonable to say that indeed, this is a parable, intended to teach moral lessons? (In fact, the Jews had a folk tale very similar to this! Jesus is using it—in modified form—to make a point.)

3. Consequently, basing a belief for an immortal soul on this parable is simply unfounded. Jesus was not attempting to teach about what happens after we die, but rather about *who* would be in the kingdom of God and *why* they would be there (see Lesson 11’s handout from the *Discover Prophecy Seminar* for more information on this parable).

G. Luke 23:39-43—The Thief on the Cross

Many people have read this text and come away believing that Jesus promised the thief that both of them would go to paradise that day. Some have concluded, therefore, that when any saved person dies, they go immediately to heaven.

But if this is true, then we are faced with three problems:

1. *The thief did not ask to go that day.* Instead, he asked Jesus to remember him “when” Jesus came into His kingdom—something which, as we will see in the next point, clearly did not happen that day.

2. *Jesus did not go to heaven that day.* We know this because three days later, Jesus Himself told Mary not to touch Him, for He had “not yet ascended to the Father” (see John 20:17).

3. *The thief could not have gone that day, for he did not die that day.* Remember that for the Jews, each new day began at sunset (see Leviticus 23:32). This is important, for the Bible strongly implies that the thief was still alive after sunset, and therefore, was still alive when the day Jesus spoke to him on (Friday) came to an end. This is recorded in **John 19:30-34** where it tells how the two thieves’ legs were broken just as the new day (the Sabbath) was about to begin. (This was done because the Jews did not want crosses up on the Sabbath, and the Romans would thus take them down and break the legs of those crucified to hasten death and prevent escape.) In other words, it appears clear that the two thieves—including the one Jesus spoke to—lived on past the end of Friday, past when Jesus died, and past the beginning of the next day.

If these things are true, then, we are still left with the challenge: How can we accurately explain this text?

The answer is surprisingly simple: *New Testament Greek does not have punctuation as we know it.* The punctuation that we find in our English translations of the New Testament is instead supplied by scholars performing the translation. In other words, while the Bible’s words are inspired of God, your particular Bible’s punctuation is inspired of men!

Consequently, in Luke 23:43, scholars simply misplaced a comma – a misplaced comma that ended up changing the entire meaning of the verse. They put the comma *before* the word “today.” But change that comma placement to *after* the word “today,” and the text is instantly in perfect harmony with all the other Bible verses on this topic. It now reads, “Truly, I say to you today, you shall be with Me in paradise.” Jesus gave the thief the assurance of salvation *that day*, and will remember him just when the thief asked to be remembered: When Jesus comes in His kingdom at the Second Coming.

H. II Corinthians 5:1-10 “...away from the body and at home with the Lord”

1. This may be THE classic defense text of the immortal soul.

2. We must read **I Cor. 15:39-44** to accurately interpret Paul's words in II Corinthians 5:8. There, Paul makes the following clear:

a. There are TWO bodies that pertain to humans potentially. These two bodies are related to each other and somehow connected, much as a seed is connected to a plant (I Cor.15:36 & 37). But in spite of their connectedness, Paul sees them as two distinct bodies. The two bodies are the "heavenly" or "spiritual" (depending on which version of the Bible you're using) body and the "earthly" or "natural" body.

b. The spiritual body is imperishable, but the natural body is perishable.

c. Question: Which one of these bodies do we have right now? The natural. When, then, will we get the spiritual body? Paul tells us in verses **51-55**: At the second coming! At that time, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, God will transform our natural bodies into spiritual ones.

d. Now, for the IMPORTANT QUESTION:

In which body will we physically be with the Lord Jesus Christ: The natural one we have now? Or the spiritual one we'll have at the second coming?

→ Answer: **Only when we are in the spiritual body will we be with the Lord.**

3. Now, **let's go back to II Cor.5:1-8**. The verse now makes excellent sense. Far from teaching that humans have an immortal soul, Paul is instead simply building on what he'd already told the Corinthian church about in his first letter to them: that we have the potential to have two bodies—the natural and the spiritual—and that he'd very much like to be absent from the natural one so that he could be with God in his newly-minted spiritual body. In other words, Paul is craving the second coming of Jesus.

4. NOTE: These same principles also apply in **Philippians 1:23 & 24** where Paul desires to depart and be with Christ, which is far better than remaining in the [natural] body; and also in **II Peter 1:13** where Peter wants to put aside "the tent of this [natural] body". The Bible is in harmony with itself!

I. I Thess.4:14 "...and so we believe God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him"—the charge being that the redeemed are *already* in heaven and thus, that's why they are seen here *coming back* to earth with Christ.

1. To be blunt, this interpretation stands the text on its head. The simple question to ask is, **when** will God bring with Jesus those who have died as believers in Christ—that is, the dead in Christ? The answer is found in verse 16: "...the Lord Himself will come down from heaven...and the *dead in Christ* will rise

first”. Where are the dead in Christ when Christ returns? ***In the grave***. So they cannot have come with Christ already from heaven.

2. Instead, God brings all raised, previously dead believers with Christ AFTER the second coming to heaven, that is, on the return trip *from* earth.

3. Remember Revelation 22:12: “Behold, I am coming soon, and my reward is *with me*, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done.” This means that there is no rewarding prior to second coming—including rewarding done to supposedly disembodied souls of the righteous dead.

4. Notice also that this interpretation of I Thessalonians 4:14 meshes very well with the original reason Paul wrote these verses. The Thessalonian believers knew that when you’re dead, you’re dead—that is, your soul does NOT fly off to heaven. That’s why they were mourning over their dead loved ones: *They thought that a person had to physically see the second coming with their own eyes in order to be included in heaven.* Thus, they feared that to die prior to the second coming was to miss heaven completely! And notice what this also means: Why would the Thessalonians be mourning the loss of their dead loved ones if they instead thought that they were enjoying the pleasures of heaven already?

J. Revelation 6:9 & 10 “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord....’”

1. Many point to this as definitive proof that the soul is distinct from the body and immortal. But there are several problems with this interpretation.

2. In the immediate context, if these are disembodied souls, why do they take up actual space—as indicated by them receiving white robes in v.11? Truly disembodied souls are just that: they have no physical body, they take up no space, and thus they cannot wear robes.

3. Again, if these souls do take up space, how can all the martyrs of history fit under that one altar? There are hundreds of thousands of them, possibly millions. Of course, this is very awkward, if not impossible.

4. A better explanation is that God is using *personification*—that is, God is giving inanimate objects (the dead) human traits in order to make a point. Revelation is a symbolic book on many an occasion, and personification fits that style quite well.

a. Some examples of personification are:

- Genesis 4:10: “The voice of your brother’s blood cries to me from the ground.” (Did the blood really “cry out” with an audible voice? Of course not.)

- Hebrews 12:24: “The blood of Jesus speaks better things than the blood of Abel.” (Again, does the actual blood of Jesus say actually pronounce words of any kind? Again, of course not. Instead, this is personification.)

b. In much the same way, I would propose that God is saying in Rev. 6:9 & 10 that He has not forgotten those who have given their all for Him. Their blood, as it were, figuratively cries out to Him for justice, and He will not leave them unavenged.

K. II Cor. 12:1-4—Paul is caught up into the third heaven

1. Compare this text with Daniel 7:1. Daniel is clearly having a dream—that is, he is asleep. But in the dream, he *feels* as though he is physically present, as though he’s actually, bodily in the events of the vision. Isaiah and Ezekiel had similar circumstances to deal with. Thus, Paul’s question in II Cor. 12:1-4 is not “Did I die and go to heaven?”, but rather, “It seemed so real—did I actually, physically go to heaven? Or was it only a vision?” He is not making a statement on whether or not man has an immortal soul.

L. I Peter 3:19—Jesus visiting the souls in prison

This is a fascinating text. Here are some thoughts on its interpretation:

1. To my knowledge, the Greek does not reveal much new here. In other words, knowing the original language does not unlock any secrets not visible in the English.
2. Based on our study thus far, it would be odd if this text taught that there is an immortal soul each person has that outlives his or her physical body.
3. Note that whoever these “spirits in prison” are, they are *not* righteous—i.e. this text says nothing about an immortal soul that immediately goes to heaven after death!
4. Note also that some interpreters have said that Jesus did this so-called “prison visitation” while He was in the grave after His crucifixion. But there is nothing in I Peter 3 that demands this. John chapter one makes it clear that Jesus has been in existence since the beginning, easily making Him available for such prison visitation *at the actual time of the flood*.
5. So who are these “spirits in prison” that Jesus visited at the time of the flood? Here are the options:
 - a. These spirits may have been evil spirits—that is, former angels of God that Christ for whatever reason went and appealed to. While some Christians may cringe at this idea, it is linguistically a possibility.
 - b. A more likely option is that the phrase refers to those who were

imprisoned by *sin* and refused Noah's invitation to repent and come back to God—that is, “spirits” here is simply a euphemism (and admittedly a unique one) for *people* who were in spiritual bondage to Satan in those days.

This may be akin to us referring to someone as a “tortured soul”. We don't say this to refer to some disembodied spirit, but rather, we use the expression to describe an actual living person who's going through a tough time. Peter may be using the phrase “spirits in prison” in a similar way.

This letter “b” option is not only a linguistic option, it is also a strong contextual option—that is, the context of I Peter 3 is not the reformation of evil spirits, but rather, the reformation of lost human beings. Thus, while scholars may contest the exact meaning of I Peter 3:19 till the second coming, it is highly unlikely it refers to anything like an immortal soul.

- M. **Acts 23:8** “The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.”

This text makes no claim to an afterlife, but rather just states their human views.

- N. **Ecclesiastes 12:5**—“And man goes to his eternal home...”

1. Ouch, this one's no fun if it's referring to man's supposedly immortal soul! For if anything, it proves eternal life in hell, not heaven! The funeral described here is not a heavenly one, but one headed downward.

2. As we've seen, the Bible does not teach that people stay in the ground forever. Everyone will rise at some point (John 5:28 & 29). So is the Bible contradicting itself? I think not. It seems better to say that, at death, one's eternal home is *decided*—there is no second chance. At death, one's probation is finished; one's decision has been made. Thus, in this sense, indeed, at death, man goes to his eternal home in the sense that his destiny is eternal home is irrevocably determined at that point.

- O. **Matthew 10:28** Jesus says, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul [Greek *psuche*]. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

1. Remember the ***principle of harmony*** in the Bible: Is it reasonable to believe that in Matthew 10:28, God is doing a sudden reversal of course and now saying that indeed, there is an eternal soul that each person has that lives on past death? No.

2. Is there instead a reasonable way to harmonize what Matthew 10:28 is saying with, for instance, Job 14:10-12, Ps.6:5, and Acts 2 are saying? Yes, there is:

3. The Greek word *psuche* is variously translated as “breath”, “life”, or “soul”. In the KJV for instance, the word is translated in the New Testament as “life” or “lives” 40 times, meaning the much the same as we use the English word “life” (check out Matthew 2:20, 6:25, and 16:25, for instance). It’s translated 58 times as “soul” or “souls” (see Matthew 10:28, 11:29, 12:18, etc., for instance). In some instances in the New Testament, the word simply means “people” (Acts 7:14; 27:37; I Peter 3:20; etc.). In other instances, it has the sense of a personal pronoun (for instance, Matt.12:18 and II Cor.12:15). At times it refers to the emotions (Mark 14:34; Luke 2:35; etc.), to the natural appetites (Rev.18:14), to the mind (Acts 14:2 and Phil.1:27), or to the heart (Ephesians 6:6).

But note carefully that there is nothing in the word *psuche* itself that even remotely implies a conscious entity that is able to survive the death of the body and hence be immortal. In no instance of its use in the Bible does *psuche* refer to a conscious entity able to exist apart from the body. The Bible knows nothing of a living, conscious soul that supposedly survives outside the body.

4. It is probable, then, that Jesus is teaching, not about one’s supposedly immortal soul, but rather about the destructiveness of sin. In other words, Jesus is saying not to be concerned about physical threats to one’s self only (perhaps a reference to Roman persecution). Be instead concerned about physical and *spiritual* threats, for spiritual threats (sin, those that make sin available, etc.) can not only destroy the physical body, but also destroy one’s eternal life.

III. Some Closing Reminders

In closing, here are some principles to remember when interpreting scripture correctly:

1. *Objectivity*. As believers, we must discern what the text in question *actually* says—not what we wish it would say or what our preconceptions force on the text.
2. *Harmony*. The Bible was written by many authors over a period of 1,500 years. But it was inspired by one and the same Spirit of God and therefore cannot be self-contradictory. If one portion of scripture says something that appears to be in contradiction with another portion of scripture, the believer cannot simply choose which point of view they prefer and ignore the apparently contradictory point of view. Instead, to the best of their ability, the believer must seek the natural interpretation of the various texts that best harmonizes with all of scripture.
3. *Love*. If we disagree with others, it ought to be done agreeably.
4. *The scrutiny of others*. We must subject our conclusions to others who disagree with us, that we may see the text from as many angles as possible.
5. And specifically for our topic of death: *Contact with “the dead” is strongly prohibited by scripture*. Connecting in any way with the dead is condemned by the Bible: Lev.19:31; Lev.20:6 (see also Lev.20:27).