



# SOUL SLEEP

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## What Really Happens When a Person Dies?

Many people approach the subject of death with fear. This is because they do not know what will happen to them after they die. However, if one consults the Bible, then this person can know with certainty what will happen to him when he dies. There are two different, but related definitions for death. The first is simply the separation of the soul from the body. The second is the eternal separation of the soul from G-d. Before we can proceed in our study, it would be helpful to also define the various parts of a human being.

In the New Covenant, Paul speaks about the **body, soul** and **spirit** of a man (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23). It is clear what Paul means when he speaks about the body, but what is the difference between the soul and the spirit? In Hebrew, there are two words נפש ונשמה. The first relates to the very essence of a person נפש while the second is the spiritual dimension of an individual. Therefore, when I spoke about the soul previously, I really meant the spiritual dimension of a person. Some scholars have said that the difference between soul and spirit in the New Testament, is that the soul is a type of “container” for the spirit.

A highly significant term in the Bible is **redemption**. Although this concept can be applied to many different matters; generally, when redemption is referred to in regard to an individual, it relates to a salvation experience, in which one’s sins are atoned and as a result of this payment, this person can now enter into the Kingdom of G-d.

Another important term that is related to this discussion is **Sheol**. Sheol is the place where, in the Old Testament, one would go when he or she would die. Sheol is located in the lower parts of the earth. Yeshua taught in Luke chapter 16 that Sheol consisted of two separate compartments. One is called Hades in Greek, i.e. **Hell**, and the other is known as **Abraham’s Bosom** (chest). Hell is a place of torment where the soul burns in agony. Abraham’s Bosom is a place where those who had the same type of faith that Abraham possessed, went when they died. This place is a type of paradise. The Scriptural basis for calling Abraham’s Bosom a type of paradise is found in Luke 23:43, where Yeshua promised the one criminal who repented and was crucified next to Him, *“Truly I say to you, Today you will be with Me in paradise.”*

When Yeshua died on the tree (Cross) the reader is told that He descended into the lower parts of the earth, where He preached to the spirits in prison (see 1 Peter 3:19). These individuals were disobedient, i.e. did not believe in the promises that G-d made to Abraham (the Abrahamic Covenant). Paul rightly states in Galatians 3:16 that the foundation of the Abrahamic Covenant is Messiah, Yeshua. Hence, those who believed like Abraham that G-d would send the Messiah to redeem His people from their sins went to Abraham’s Bosom, while those who rejected this promise, i.e. acted in faithlessness, descended into Hell.

It is vital that one realizes that up until Yeshua’s ministry, those in Abraham’s Bosom only believed that G-d would send the Messiah, but they had no idea who the Messiah is. Therefore, the Scripture informs the reader that after going and proclaiming His identity to those in Hell, who did not believe in the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant and revealing why they were in torment, Yeshua then went to Abraham’s Bosom and revealed Himself as the One in Whom they had hoped. Paul then states in Ephesians chapter 4 that Yeshua later took those in Abraham’s Bosom to heaven (read Ephesians 4:8-10).

Therefore today, although Sheol stills exists, there is only Hell that remains. Yeshua emptied Abraham’s Bosom. Many see Isaiah 5:14 as a basis for this view. There, it is stated,

לכן הרחיבה שאול נפשה ופערה פיה לבלי חוק וירד הדרה והמונה ושאוונה ועלז בה.

*Therefore, **Sheol has enlarged** herself and opened her mouth without measure. It will go down, its glory and its multitude and its noise and the one who rejoiced in it.*

What this verse reveals is that Sheol has been enlarged and her entrance (mouth) is open wide in order to receive those who took pleasure in this world and ignored G-d's Word.

How can we know that Abraham's Bosom does not exist today? The Bible states that Yeshua has ascended back into the heavens. Yeshua promised believers that where He is, they will be also (see John 14:3). Similarly, Paul states that to be absent from this body (dead) is to be present with the L-rd (2 Corinthians 5:8). So if Yeshua is in Heaven and believers, when they die will be with Him, it is clear that believers go immediately to Heaven when they die. It is important to state that when I say "believers go immediately to Heaven when they die"; **I am referring to the believer's redeemed soul נשמה and not their body.**

There are some within Christianity who strongly disagree with my statement that when a believer dies, his spirit goes immediately to heaven to be with Yeshua. They instead assert that one's **soul sleeps in the earth** until Messiah returns and brings the resurrection. They are referring to the Second Coming. However, Paul refers to another type resurrection which he calls our Blessed Hope.

*"Expecting the Blessed Hope and manifestation of the glory of our great G-d and Savior Yeshua the Messiah."* Titus 2:13

Theologians call the Blessed Hope the **Rapture**. Unfortunately, it is becoming more frequent for believers to deny the Rapture altogether. In fact, a few years ago I was a speaker at a Messianic conference where another speaker gave a lecture on why he did not believe in the Rapture. His primary reason was that he did not see such an event taught in Judaism. Such a position ignores Paul's statement in First Corinthians 15:51 where he says our Blessed Hope is a **mystery**; that is, something that was not revealed by the Prophets. It is important that a person understands what the Rapture is.

In First Thessalonians chapter 5, Paul emphatically states that believers will not experience the wrath of G-d.

*"Because G-d has not set us for wrath, but for acquiring salvation through our L-rd Yeshua the Messiah."* I Thessalonians 5:9

What actually is our Blessed Hope? Scripture teaches that through the Blessed Hope believers in Messiah Yeshua will not experience the wrath of G-d, i.e. will not be upon the earth for the period known as the Great Tribulation. How will believers escape this? The Rapture is derived from the Latin word for taking or removing something quickly from its place. This idea is expressed in First Thessalonians 4:17. In this verse, Paul informs the reader that Messiah will descend from the heavens and **we** who are still alive will be **snatched up** ἀρπαιζόμεθα together with **those who are dead**. It is most important that one understands that the word "**we**" refers to only believers in Messiah Yeshua who are alive at that moment in time; while the phrase "**those who are dead**" relates to believers throughout the last 2,000 years who had accepted the message of Yeshua's Gospel prior to dying.

There seems to be a conflict between what has just been stated and what was stated previously in this article. If those believers who have died in faith are not gathered up until the Rapture, **then how was it correct to state that when a believer dies that he or she immediately goes to be present with Yeshua?** Before an answer is provided to this very legitimate question, another issue must be interjected into this discussion. This issue is the concept of “**soul sleep**”, alluded to earlier. Soul sleep is an **errant** doctrine which purports that when a person dies, his soul remains in his body in a state of unconsciousness (sleep) until the time of the Rapture for a believer, and until the time of judgement for non-believers. (Some adherents to the doctrine of soul sleep reject the Rapture altogether, and state that the soul sleeps until the Second Coming of Messiah).

Those who adhere to this doctrine see Yeshua’s teaching of the **Rich Man and Lazarus** in Luke 16 as solely metaphoric. In other words, it is a parable to illustrate a point and should **not** be taken literally. The problem with such a view is that **nowhere** in the text does it state that this account is a parable. Frequently, the reader is informed when Yeshua is giving a parable. This is not the case in this account. Also, the language of the text is narrative and does not hint whatsoever to that of a metaphorical teaching. In addition to these things, it would be most problematic for Yeshua to use this story to illustrate a Biblical point when the story is based on false theology. Therefore one must conclude that the subject material of this account is **factual**; that is, Hades and Abraham’s Bosom are literal places within Sheol and people do not enter into a state of unconsciousness when they die.

The real confusion in regard to the doctrine of soul sleep is based upon a failure to perceive correctly the intent of the Biblical statement concerning those that **sleep in the earth**. This saying which appears not only in the Bible, but also in the primary prayer of the synagogue service called the Amidah, **should not be understood literally**. It is clear that in Judaism and in Scripture as well, **death is often referred to as sleep**. For example, Yeshua referred to the 12 year old daughter of Jarius (Yair) who had clearly died, as merely being asleep. Obviously the miracle was not that Yeshua woke her up from a nap, but she had actually died and He raised her from the dead. Likewise, when Stephen was stoned to death in Acts 7, the Scripture states that he fell asleep (Acts 7:60). The question that one needs to ask is simply “Why does the Bible and therefore Judaism, speak of death as sleep?” The answer relates to resurrection. In the same way that when one goes to sleep there is an expectation that he will wake up; when one dies there should be a sure expectation that he will rise again. Daniel, in chapter 12, states there are **two types of resurrection**—those who will be resurrected to everlasting life and others to everlasting shame and disgrace.

*“Many from the ones who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to everlasting shame and disgrace.” Daniel 12:2*

So death is not an end to a person’s existence, he will arise. But what will really be resurrected and when? The answer to this question is vital in order to understand why the doctrine of soul sleep is incorrect and what truly happens to a person when he or she dies. This answer also explains why it is **not** a conflict to state that when a **believer dies, he or she immediately goes to be present with Yeshua and at the time of the Rapture this one will be gathered up**. This is because what actually goes to be present with Yeshua when a believer dies is only the soul, while what will be gathered up at the time of the Rapture is only the transformed remains of the believer. This will become clearer when I answer what happens to a person when he or she dies. This answer must be divided into two categories: **Believers and Non-believers:**

**The Non-believer:** When a person fails to respond to the Gospel message of Yeshua, for whatever reason, when this person dies, his or her soul separates from the body and descends into hell. One must remember that the soul is truly the essence of the person. In hell, this person's soul is in constant torment, which will continue until after the Millennial Kingdom. After the Millennial Kingdom, his soul will be resurrected to the **Great White Throne**, where he will be condemned by his works. Because this one also had rejected the Gospel, he and others who rejected Yeshua will be cast eternally into the lake that burns forever.

**The Believer:** Every Believer will take part in the **Blessed Hope**, i.e. the **Rapture**. As was previously stated, we are speaking about believers throughout all generations. Those believers who had died before the Rapture will be with Messiah in Heaven. The reader must remember we are only referring to the **soul of the believer**. Their bodies naturally have decayed into dust, regardless of how they died and what was actually done to the remains. At the time of the Rapture, these remains will miraculously be transformed into a new body which will be created specially for the Kingdom existence and united with the soul. Immediately after this, those believers who are still alive at this time will have their bodies similarly transformed. This means that they will receive the same type of Kingdom body and join those believers from previous generations being caught up with Messiah in the sky and taken by Him into Heaven during the Great Tribulation on Earth.

It is at the end of the Great Tribulation that Yeshua will return to Earth to finish His wrath and deliver Israel, who will receive Him; as well as those from the Gentiles who came to faith after the Rapture. It is shortly after His Second Coming, that His Kingdom will be established for a thousand years. After the thousand years end, and a short additional time of G-d's wrath. This wrath will be poured upon those who were born during the Millennial Kingdom and who rejected Yeshua. Then the final state of G-d's Kingdom, The New Jerusalem, will be established.

May we be ready for these events by means of submissiveness to the Word of G-d and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.