

The State of the Dead Answering Objections

Many objections are raised by advocates of dualism (separate soul and body) to the idea of soul sleep. This survey will briefly cover the major texts used to support dualism, with a proper understanding of those texts explored so that the truth of the Bible will become clear.

1. "If I am in my mortal body, I am absent from God, and if I am absent from this body, I am present with God." Phil 1:23, 2 Cor 5:6-8

6 Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord--

7 for we walk by faith, not by sight--

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. 2 Cor 5:6-8 (Phil 1:23 has similar content.)

This text shows that the logic in the premise is flawed. Those who suggest that this supports dualism forget that all Paul is saying is that if he is here he is not there, and if he is there he is not here. He says nothing about the "in-between" situation. It can be an immediate transition or centuries of soul sleep without affecting the statements. As for Paul, since he will sleep between death and the resurrection, he will be unaware of the passage of time, and the resurrection will seem to be instantaneous upon death.

2. "God is the God of the living, not God of the dead." (Matt 22:32, Mark 12:26, Luke 20:37-38)

37 "But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

38 "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him." (Luke 20:37-38)

This passage includes the most difficult appearing form of the three parallel accounts. However, as we examine this carefully, we will find that it actually allows us to properly illustrate the intent of Jesus' statement.

In the dualistic view, on death, our "soul" ascends to heaven to be with Christ. The Roman Catholic Church describes this as the "beatific vision." The souls of the dead are thus in direct communion with the Lord. This would mean that God is the God of the dead, in direct contradiction to Jesus' statement. But Luke records that "all (men) live to Him." Doesn't this mean that your soul lives on after death?

Verse 37 states that "the dead are raised." If we accept the simple present tense of this passage, that would say that the resurrection has already occurred. But the entire NT speaks to the resurrection as being future, so that cannot be what Jesus is saying. The alternate way to see the statement is that Jesus is stating the certainty of the resurrection by using "prophetic perfect tense." God is therefore the God of the resurrection (the living), not the God of the grave (the dead).

We should also remember that God lives outside of time, since He is "from everlasting to everlasting" (1 Chr 16:36, Ps 41:13; 90:2, etc.) God created everything, including time (John 1:3). He tells the end from the beginning (Is 46:10, Rev 22:13.) Therefore, God sees all time in the same way we see "now." He can see all men as alive, by looking at them when they were alive. In this way, all men are alive in God's eyes, even though they may be dead to men, since men live within time.

We can see that, far from supporting the life of the "soul" after death, these passages contradict it.

3. "Man's breath goes to heaven, while the breath of animals goes to the earth. Breath is a figurative way of describing the 'soul.'" (Eccl 3:21)

19 For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity.

20 All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust.

21 Who knows that the breath of man ascends upward and the breath of the beast descends downward to the earth?

22 And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him? (Eccl 3:18-22)

Our first task is to review the Hebrew for "breath" and "soul". These words are "*ruach*" and "*nepshesh*," and are not used synonymously. Thus, the first assertion regarding the presence of the "soul" in this passage is incorrect.

Next, we may note that Solomon describes the breath of man and of animals with the same word: *ruach*. He clearly talks of man and animals having the same breath (not soul) in verse 19. If the breath of a man is his soul, then the breath of the animal is its soul, and no theologian of which I am aware speaks of animals having souls. Then he tells us that men and animals "return to the dust." There is no hint of a separate body and soul in this. Solomon describes man in the same way as animals: as a unitary whole.

Verse 21 then appears as a rhetorical question. Having identified the fates of man and animals as being identical, Solomon asks "Who knows?" about any difference in their final fates. Since there is no difference, the answer is obvious: "No one." In other words, it doesn't happen. Verse 21 is directly answered in verse 22, when Solomon rhetorically points out that no one will see what happens after his own death. This clearly denies an immortal soul which ascends to God at death. We can also look to Psalm 104:10, where God is clearly stated as the source of breath for animals, so their breath would figuratively ascend like man's.

4. "Man's spirit (soul) returns to God at death." (Eccl 12:7, Acts 7:59-60, James 2:26, Eccl 3:22)

7 then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Eccl 12:7)

This text is a clear allusion to Genesis 2:7 where God blew into Adam's nostrils the breath of life and he became a living soul and 3:19, where Adam is told he will return to the dust. It also echoes Eccl 3:20 reviewed above. The word translated "spirit" is "*ruach*," the Hebrew word for breath. All Solomon is saying is that God gives us breath, and when we die, the breath of life figuratively returns to God. It says nothing about an immortal soul.

59 And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

60 And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)

Having seen the proper meaning of "spirit" in Ecclesiastes, we can see its application in the story of Stephen. Stephen is making the same reference here by asking Jesus to receive his breath. The Greek word "*pneuma*" is the equivalent of the Hebrew "*ruach*." We can further note that Stephen did not ascend to heaven, he "fell asleep." This is the consistent Biblical description of death. It describes a state of unconsciousness from which one can be awakened by the call of God.

26 For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead. (James 2:26)

This text has a word in it that is not in the Greek. The phrase is "without spirit" not "without THE spirit." Since "spirit" is equivalent to "breath", James is saying that the body without breath is dead to set up his statement about faith without works.

Eccl 3:22 has been answered above.

5. There are different levels in Sheol. (Deut 32:22)

22 For a fire is kindled in My anger, And burns to the lowest part of Sheol, And consumes the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.

This text is merely an emphatic description of God's anger. It is a natural description since Sheol is described as being under the ground. (Job 11:8, Isa 44:23, Ezek 26:20, Amos 9:2) This is again a natural description since when a person died, he was buried under the ground in a grave in Jewish society.

6. When you go to the grave, you go to be with your ancestors who are aware. (Gen 15:15; 25:8; 35:29; 37:35; 49:33, Num 20:24-28; 31:2)

8 And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people. (Gen 25:8)

This expression is used repeatedly in the OT. It is literally true in the sense that Abraham's ancestors are all dead and in the grave (Sheol) where Abraham was placed. But advocates of the immortality of the soul would like us to believe that it means that Abraham joined an assembly of living "souls" in an intermediate place between death and heaven. This would require that those souls be aware in contradiction to Eccl 9:10, etc. However, we can take "gathering to his people" as a figure of speech, and in this way it can be seen to agree with the frequent (>30 times) usage of the expression "so and so slept with his fathers." In this way it offers no support to the idea of awareness after death.

7. We live with Christ while asleep (dead). 1 Thess 5:8-9

9 For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,
10 who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.

While it is possible to take this text in isolation to say that we live with Christ while dead, the key to note is that this is not required. Paul talks of the destiny of God's people, just after talking about how the dead will be raised to join Christ in the verses just before (1 Thess 4:13-17). This passage is one of the strongest statements that the dead are sleeping, and therefore unaware. So Paul would be contradicting himself if he were to say what dualists suggest. In fact, Paul is saying that the ultimate destiny of the saints, whether alive or dead, is to be with God rather than punishment. He is saying nothing about the fate of a person at death.

8. Jesus will bring the souls of the saints with Him from heaven. (1 Thess 4:14)

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope.

14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep.

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord.

This passage is one of the strongest pointing out that death is a sleep. Paul explicitly equates death and sleep. The problem is that verse 14 sounds like the saints will come from heaven to earth. But again, that would contradict Paul's statements in the same passage that they are sleeping in the grave. The proper understanding of this is that Jesus will bring the dead saints FROM earth TO heaven (see John 14:1-3). Paul's point in verse 14 is that the dead will not be left behind. This passage lends no support to the idea that the souls of the dead are alive with Christ now.

9. The spirits of men made perfect are now in heaven. (Heb 12:23)

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,

23 to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,

24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

This interpretation comes from refusing to note the context of the statement. The writer of Hebrews is speaking to new prospects to the faith. These living Christians are figuratively described as coming to the abode of God, described as Mount Zion, Jerusalem, and the city of the living God. These people have not left the earth to go anywhere, whether in heaven or in the grave, so this is not a physical

description of events. There is no reason to take the rest of the passage as literal. In fact, it is proper to understand the phrase about spirits in the context of the spiritual motivation of living persons who have joined themselves to Christ, and have thus been perfected. The prospects are then exhorted (v. 25 ff.) to not refuse the call to conversion.

10. Death cannot separate us from the love (presence) of God. (Rom 8:38-39)

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,
39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This marvelous reassurance of our security in Christ comes from the pen of the apostle which gave us such a clear statement of the state of the dead in 1 Thess 4. Those who are dead are unaware, but when at the resurrection, they will rise to an eternity with Christ. Paul has said here that even death cannot remove the security of the promises Christ has made to us in love. He has not said that we are alive after death so as to appreciate God's love between death and the resurrection.

11. Christ confirmed that the body and soul are separate parts of man. (Matt 10:28)

28 "And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

On first glance the dualist approach might seem to be correct, but this ignores the context. The Jews had adopted the Platonistic idea that man consisted of two separate parts: a body and an immortal soul. Your soul never died, even if you were condemned, but suffered eternally in the fires of Gehenna. The message is tailored to people who were indoctrinated in this view. This disciples themselves were not yet conversant with the truth, for they had just been recruited.

In this passage, Jesus is giving the disciples the advertising message to take to the Jews to get them to come hear Him. He is telling them not to fear the Romans, who can kill them (kill the body) but not the soul (their eternal hope). They are instead to fear God who can do what they believe to be impossible: destroy them completely in hell. Jesus has used their incorrect beliefs as a hook to get their attention to listen to a teaching which flatly contradicts what they believed. He has turned dualism on its head by saying that the soul can be destroyed. So a passage which on first glance seems to support dualism in fact strikes against the heart of this false doctrine. We should note that in the parallel passage in Luke we find exactly this interpretation confirmed.

4 "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.

5 "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! (Luke 12:4-5)

12. The gospel has been preached to the dead. (1 Pet 3:18-20; 4:5-6)

18 For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;

19 in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison,

20 who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. (1 Pet 3:18-20)

5 but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

6 For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead, that though they are judged in the flesh as men, they may live in the spirit according to the will of God. (1 Pet 4:5-6)

Both of these passages are from the same discussion. Peter is drawing out the idea that all should live holy lives, because all will be judged, since all have had the gospel preached to them in one way or another. Before we dig into the texts, we should note that in 1 Pet 3:19, the translators have added the word "now" to the text, implying that the proclamation made by Christ is a recent event to spirits while in

some spirit prison. This is a dualist interpretation imposed on the text by dualist translators. If we remove this word which is absent in the Greek, we may see the intent of the passage.

Verse 19 is what we would call a parenthetical comment. Instead of referring to an event which is in sequence after the cross and resurrection in verse 18, it is a "by the way" statement. Jesus preached to "spirits in prison" at some other time. Verse 20 identifies these spirits as people before the flood, eight of whom were rescued in the ark. The term "prison" can be properly understood when we see Eph 4:8 where we see that "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives." We are all captives of sin, and Jesus is our way to freedom from the prison of sin in which we are prisoners. At the cross, a number of saints were resurrected, and at Jesus' ascension he took them with Him. Now we can see that the expression "spirits in prison" refers to men living in the sinful world. Jesus' preaching "in the spirit" refers to His inspiration of Noah to preach repentance to the wicked world around him. It says nothing about a "spirit prison" where the souls of the dead are kept.

Having seen the proper understanding of first part of Peter's message, the second falls in place. He is not saying that the message was preached to an individual after his death. He is saying that even those who are now dead had an opportunity to hear the message while they were alive, and therefore are liable in the judgment. This echoes Rom 1:20 and Ps 19:1-4, which state that all persons have had the opportunity to learn about God, even if they have not formally heard the gospel.

Conclusion

This has not been an exhaustive survey, but it covers the major issues which are raised by advocates of the dualist position. If one begins with a belief that man consists of a separate body and soul, it is possible to derive support from various NT passages, particularly when the translators have added words which support that position. But if one is willing to let scripture speak for itself, the clear testimony of scripture is that man is a soul, and that between death and the resurrection he "sleeps." He will awaken at the shout of the archangel at the second coming. All of the passages which have been used to support dualism prove to be either of no probative value, or as in the case of Matt 10:28, can be properly seen to be actually deny dualism.

If we properly understand the nature of death, we will have the same hope as the Apostles in the resurrection. If we accept the false doctrine of dualism, the hope of resurrection becomes an after thought, and of little value. The focus the NT gives to the resurrection become worthless, and the gospel a sham. It will also lead us to believe that punishment of the wicked will never end. This is not the image of a kind and loving God. This is sadism. If we accept the truth of the state of the dead, then we can accept the mercy of a God who will not torment the wicked forever, but will destroy them in hell (Matt 10:28).