

The State of the Dead Answering Objections

The Seventh-day Adventist church is distinguished from other Christian churches by three doctrines: the State of the Dead, the Sabbath, and the Investigative Judgment. In this session we will briefly discuss the positive statement of the doctrine of the State of the Dead. Then we will discuss the commonly cited objections to the doctrine proposed by dualists.

The foundation of the doctrine is found in the following texts.

1. Man is dust and will return to dust at death. Gen 3:19
2. The fate of man and animals is the same. They both return to dust at death. Eccl 3:19-22
3. The dead do not know anything. Eccl 9:5
4. There is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in the grave. Eccl 9:10
5. Man's thoughts perish at death. Psalm 146:4
6. The dead do not talk of God. Psalm 6:5
7. The dead do not praise the Lord. Psalm 115:17
8. After Jesus ascended, David was still in the grave and had not gone to heaven. Acts 2:34

These texts clearly define, by unambiguous language, the fact that at death, man ceases to exist. This is frequently referred to as "sleep" in scripture. This gives the doctrine its name of "soul sleep." By way of contrast, most Christians believe that at death you separate into parts where your body dies, but your "soul" or "spirit" goes to heaven to be with Christ. Obviously, if the only texts you look at are the ones above, you will have no difficulty showing that this doctrine is incorrect. But many texts in the NT are taken to support the dualist (separate body and soul) doctrine.

Our task is to examine these texts to determine how they are in fact consistent with soul sleep. In doing so, it is worthwhile to remember that all passages which deal with the issue will be in agreement. There is no competition to see which side gets more texts, or who had the last word. The clear statements are the standard by which all texts must be interpreted unless there is a clear issue of a confounding context. Since there is no such context for any of the texts above, the doctrine of soul sleep is correct. Unfortunately, there are texts which allow for the dualist interpretation if not compared carefully with the OT texts. Without further ado, let us examine these passages.

In each of the following situations, explain the proper interpretation of the texts in question.

1. If I am alive I am absent from God. If I am dead, I am with God. (Phil 1:23, 2 Cor 5:6-8)

2. God is the God of the living, not the God of the dead. Therefore, we live with him after our death. (Matt 22:32, Mark 12:26, Luke 20:37-38)

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)

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

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

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)

7. We live with Christ while asleep (dead). 1 Thess 5:8-9
8. Jesus will bring the souls of the saints with Him from heaven. (1 Thess 4:14)
9. The spirits of men made perfect are now in heaven. (Heb 12:23)
10. Death cannot separate us from the love (presence) of God. (Rom 8:38-39)
11. Christ confirmed that the body and soul are separate parts of man. (Matt 10:28)
12. The gospel has been preached to the dead. (1 Pet 3:18-20; 4:5-6)