

The Intermediate State: Soul Sleep... Does it exist?

Because the Bible does not say much about what happens to one's soul upon death, there is considerable confusion and debate on the question of an intermediate state. The intermediate state is defined as the time between a person's physical death and resurrection. Is there a place that a person's soul goes to for a period of time before going on to heaven?

Soul Sleep: Some believe that at death, the soul of the Christian goes into an unconscious state and does not leave the body. The Believer's body and soul sleep until Christ returns and resurrects the Believer who then enters heaven.

Is there biblical evidence for Soul Sleep?

Advocates of Soul Sleep base their position on:

1. A literal understanding of the passages that speak of death as sleep and awakenings as resurrections.
2. The soul does not leave the body upon death.
3. The soul remains with the body after death and both are resurrected together.

However a close exegesis of the relevant biblical passages does not support the concept of Soul Sleep.

There are over sixty instances where death is referred to as "sleep". About half of these instances can be found in the historical accounts of the Old Testament Kings where the phrase "slept with his fathers" is used:

1 Kings 1:21; 2:10; 11:21, 43; 14:20, 31; 15:8, 24; 16:6, 28; 22:40, 50

2 Kings 8:24; 10:35; 13:9, 13; 14:16, 22, 29; 15:7, 22, 38; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6

2 Chronicles 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13; 21:1; 26:2, 23; 27:9; 28:27; 32:33; 33:20

In these passages about the Old Testament Kings, the expression "slept with his fathers" is a euphemism for death. There is no mention or evidence that this phrase is in reference to one's soul.

Similar expressions such as "gathered to his people" or "to go to his fathers" are not understood literally for death or burial in the family crypt; instead, they are euphemisms for the belief that those who have died still exist and that another is about to join them (see the article: What did Old Testament Believers think of life after death? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatDidOTBelieversThink.aspx). An example can be seen with King David:

"When your days are fulfilled that **you must go to be with your fathers**, that I will set up one of your descendants after you, who will be of your sons; and I will establish his kingdom." (1 Chron 17:11)

"Then David **slept with his fathers** and was buried in the city of David." (1 Kings 2:10)

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Likewise in other instances where “sleep” or “falling asleep” refers to the state of death, the context is pretty clear, and there is no direct or indirect reference to the state of one’s soul.

Job 3:13; 14:12; Psalms 13:3; 76:5-6; 90:5; Jeremiah 51:39, 57; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:59-60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:10; 2 Peter 3:4

In other passages, the Bible indicates that upon death, the soul of a person leaves the body and enters into the presence of God (see www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatHappensSpiritWhenPeopleDie.aspx). For example, in Luke 23:46, just before Christ dies on the cross, He cries out’ “Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit.” Jesus’ own words indicate that His spirit was brought into the presence of God.

The term “sleep” or the phrase “falling asleep”, when used in reference to death, apparently refers to the temporal nature of death.

What about the difficult passages where Jesus resuscitates Jarius’ daughter (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52) and Lazarus (John 11:1-44)? If, upon death, the Believer’s soul goes into the presence of God, how can one be resuscitated? Isn’t this proof that the soul never leaves the body upon death?

While it is difficult to understand miracles, Jesus reveals a significant purpose when resuscitating Lazarus: “Father, I thank you that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.” (John 11:41-42)

Jesus’ performed the miracles of resuscitating dead people for the purpose of testifying to His deity.

To learn more, see the article: What Do You Make of Resuscitations?! at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatDoYouMakeOfResuscitation.aspx.