

Study Guide #22: Are the Dead Really Alive?

Introduction

Most Christians believe that when a person dies, only his body dies, but his immortal, immaterial soul or spirit goes immediately to its reward in heaven or hell, or perhaps to purgatory. Then at the resurrection at the 2nd Coming of Jesus, He brings back the immortal souls with Him, reunites them with their resurrected bodies, and returns the whole person to his eternal reward. In the intermediate state—between death and resurrection—most believers hold that the immortal souls of the saved are in a disembodied state *or* they are given special celestial bodies. We explore the issue of what happens when you die in this Study Guide.

Question #1: Is the immortality of the soul consistent with good logic?

Answer: *First*, anything immaterial would exist outside of time and space, for everything in time and space is essentially physical, even energy, which we now know is another form of matter. See Explorer I, Study Guide #2 for a discussion of matter-energy and the eternal nature of whatever is *immaterial*. If a human soul or spirit were immaterial, it would then exist outside of time and space and thus be eternal. However, the Christian belief is that God is the *only* essential *immaterial* entity in the universe (He is a spirit, John 4:24). So if the essence of a person (his soul or spirit) is immaterial, then the essence of a person is that he is God—an obviously blasphemous concept to a Christian. To get around this conclusion, it's often claimed that God creates a soul at conception. But that's not a solution because even God can't make something that's eternal, for by definition, an eternal entity has always existed. Sometimes it's said that God takes a piece of His own nature and places it in the human fetus. But that doesn't work either because that would mean that God's nature can be subtracted from, which would make Him less than fully God. But there's no such thing as being partly God; one is either God or He isn't. By definition, His nature is *indivisible*.

Question #2: What makes a human being? What are his essential parts?

Answer: Genesis 2:7 describes the creation of the 1st human being: **“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [soul]”** (NKJV). The Hebrew word for **“being”** there is the same word usually translated as “soul.” In other words, man doesn't *have* a soul; he *is* a soul. When he dies, **“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it”** (Ecclesiastes 12:7, NKJV). The Hebrew word for **“spirit”** means “breath,” essentially meaning “air.” Therefore, the “spirit” is the breath of life, as a check of the parallel phrases in Job 33:4 and Isaiah 42:5 show:



Breath of Life

The *Spirit* of God has made me,
And the *breath* of the Almighty gives me life (Job 33:4, NKJV).

Who [God] gives *breath* to the people on it,
And *spirit* to those who walk on it (Isaiah 42:5, NKJV).

Question #3: So what happens when a person dies?

Therefore, when a person dies, the 2 elements of dust and breath (spirit) return to their original sources, one (dust) to the earth and the other (spirit) to God. Since the spirit is the spark of life, it doesn't contain the essence of the person, nor is it immortal. Rather, it's the activating principle that gives life. The Scriptures teach that animals have the same "**spirit**" (breath) that people do (Ecclesiastes 3:19), yet no Christian argues that animals have immortal souls or spirits. This truth can easily be illustrated in a couple of ways. *First*, when you turn off the light switch, the electricity returns to its regular circuit; the electricity isn't the essence of the light itself. *Second*, if you notice 5 long metal bars on the ground, along with some chains and a seat, you recognize those as parts of swing set. But the swing set doesn't exist unless and until someone puts the parts together in the correct way. In the meantime, the individual parts don't constitute the essence of the swing set. Thus, if you take the swing set apart, the swing set simply ceases to exist.

Question #4: Surely Adam and Eve must have been created with immortality because the Bible teaches that death came only as the result of sin.

Answer: Yes, it's true that God must have created Adam and Eve with immortality. However, according to Genesis 3:22-24, God expelled them from the Garden of Eden so they would not have *continued access* to the Tree of Life and live forever. This is called *conditional immortality*—conditional on their passing the loyalty test and thus continuing to have access to the Tree of Life. In some way, eating the fruit from that tree was necessary for them to maintain their immortality. This truth implicitly means that God didn't create man with *innate* (intrinsic) immortality, that is, immortality that's a permanent part of their nature.



Tree of Life

Look at it another way. If only the physical body dies while the soul or spirit lives on, then only his *body* must be guilty of sin. But the Bible teaches, and common sense verifies, that sin begins in the mind (James 1:14-15). So if sin is *primarily* mental and then is acted out physically, and God only deprived Adam and Eve of their *physical* immortality because of their sin, then He made a terrible and unjust mistake. Of course, God doesn't make mistakes. Therefore, we conclude that He took away their *conditional* immortality as whole persons. [NOTE: This fact indicates that after some unspecified period of time, if Adam and Eve had continued to pass the loyalty test regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God would have banned Satan from the Garden and probably from the earth altogether.]

Question #5: Are there any Scriptures that confirm that mankind doesn't have immortality today?

Answer: Yes. I Timothy 6:16 declares that God **“alone has immortality”** (NKJV; cf. v. 15) within His very nature. Believers **“seek for...immortality”** (Romans 2:7, NKJV). One doesn't seek what he already possesses. I John 5:11-13 says that eternal life is in Jesus, and we possess it only due to our relationship with Him (relational immortality). However, that immortality doesn't actually reside *in* us until it's received at the 2nd Coming of Jesus (Matthew 25:46; Mark 10:30; cf. Titus 1:2; 3:7).

Question #6: What one text summarizes the view that man doesn't have an immortal soul or spirit?

Answer: We would have to cite 2 texts as tied for that honor: (1) John 3:16 and (2) Romans 6:23. John 3:16 says that **“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”** (NKJV). And Romans 6:23 declares that **“the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (NKJV). Both of these texts make it abundantly clear that the eternal destination choice is between *death* and *life*, *not* between *life* in hell (or purgatory) and *life* in heaven. Moreover, Romans 6:23 calls eternal life a **“gift”** from God, not something we *inherently* possess. These passages tell us that the popular belief of death as the separation of the body and soul is a false teaching.

Question #7: Does this truth mean that the soul sleeps in the grave?

Answer: We wouldn't say that the soul sleeps but that the *whole person* sleeps in the grave. Death is described as a sleep at least 66 times in 17 different books of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments). Those who teach the immortality of the soul insist that the body sleeps but not the soul. *First*, it's never appropriate to say that the body is unconscious apart from the mind because the issue of consciousness especially concerns the mind. Thus, it's the whole person who sleeps in death, although it's a dreamless sleep since there are no brain waves. [NOTE: The mind always interacts with the soul, according to those who believe in a separate immortal soul.]



Sleeping in their Graves

Second, sleep implies a later awakening in a resurrection. In fact, I Corinthians 15:17-18 states that **“if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished”** (NKJV). If Paul understood that we have an immortal soul, then we should have expected him to say that they would remain alive in hell forever. Instead, he says that without the resurrection, they would **“have perished,”** which means “to destroy fully.”

Question #8: What does Paul mean by the statement in I Thessalonians 4:14 that Jesus will bring the saints with Him at the Second Coming of Jesus?

Answer: Here is I Thessalonians 4:14: “**For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus**” (NKJV). *First*, the Greek word for “so” means “in the same way or manner.” This indicates that just as God raised Jesus from the dead and took Him to heaven, so He will raise the dead in Christ and take them to heaven. *Second*, this is confirmed by verses 16-18 that declare the resurrection occurs first and is then followed by the bringing of the saints into Jesus’ presence.

A For if we believe that Jesus died
B and [Jesus] rose again
B¹ God will bring with Him
A¹ those who sleep in Jesus



The above diagram of verse 14 shows that God bringing with Him is equivalent to the fact that Jesus “**rose again.**” *Finally*, in verse 18, Paul used these facts to comfort the saints. But if God’s people’s souls went immediately to heaven after death, we would have expected Paul to comfort the people by telling them that their dead loved ones were already in heaven. [NOTE: I Thessalonians 3:13 teaches us that Jesus will bring “**all His saints**” at His 2nd Coming. Comparing this to Matthew 24:31, and knowing that the

Greek word for “**saints**” means “holy ones,” Jesus said that He will be bringing His holy *angels* with Him at His 2nd Coming, not His saved *people*.]

Question #9: Do the numerous near-death experiences (NDEs) tell us that life exists after death?

Answer: Advocates of the immortality of the soul declare that the numerous near-death experiences (NDEs) prove that there’s life immediately after death. While there’s still much we don’t know about the human brain, we *do* know that when it’s deprived of sufficient oxygen, during some traumatic circumstance like surgery, a person can hallucinate. An altered state of consciousness can also occur as a result of hypnotism, Eastern meditation, certain drugs, and even in the dream stage of sleep. It should be noted that the accepted definition of death today is *brain death*. *Clinical death* results from the cessation of blood circulation or of lung function (air circulation). Both of these cessations can be revived and even sustained by artificial medical means today. However, a person is dead (from which he will never again be conscious) only when he’s *brain* dead. Even there, for several minutes after an EEG goes flat, indicating no brain activity, the brain undergoes a relatively short spurt of energy. But eventually, even that ends, with the result being that the person is completely dead.

All near-death experiences occur when a person is *not* brain dead. Since the person isn’t actually dead in the *complete* sense, near-death experiences prove nothing about the state of man in death. Also, remember that Jesus once resurrected Lazarus, who had been dead for 4 days (John 11). Not only did Lazarus say nothing about heaven, but he also didn’t complain that Jesus had brought him out of heaven back to earth.

Question #10: Even if death is an unconscious sleep, what difference does it make? After all, we will all eventually find out for ourselves, won't we?

Answer: It's always important to believe God because Satan never tells a lie unless he intends to eventually use it to deceive us. There are at least 3 reasons why it's important to know the truth about death:

- Belief in the immortality of the soul tends to undermine the importance of the 2nd Coming of Jesus because the alleged individual-at-death entrance into glory weakens the significance of the Biblical corporate return of Jesus.
- The dualism inherent in the belief of the immortality of the soul has historically tended to promote 2 different unbiblical extremes: (a) denial of basic human comforts in an effort to punish the body and achieve a higher level of spiritual holiness of the soul (monastic and ascetic practices), and (b) ignoring of Biblical health principles as unnecessary because the body isn't viewed with the same importance as the soul.
- Satan and his demonic angels will greatly increase their use of the supernatural in the end-time in order to deceive almost the whole world into following him (Matthew 24:24; Revelation 13:12-14; 16:13-16). Satan and his evil angels can transform themselves and take on any appearance they wish to. [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guide #2 for evidence concerning the nature of angels.] If you believe that the dead are really *alive* somewhere else, how will you react if an evil angel impersonating a dead loved one appears and teaches some supposed spiritual truth? Never underestimate the devil; our only protection will be our reliance on a "thus saith the Lord."



A Poor Diet