

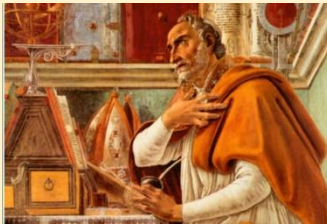
Study Guide #23: Difficult Texts on Death

Introduction

Please read Explorer II, Study Guide #22 as preparation for reading this Study Guide #23. In #22 we laid the foundation for understanding the Bible's teaching on what happens when a person dies. In *this* Study Guide, we examine and answer the more difficult Bible texts regarding the topic of death.

Question #1: Where did the “immortality of the soul” doctrine originate?

Answer: Historically, the idea of the immortality of the soul—that a human soul can't die—is called *anthropological dualism*, that man consists of (a) a physical body and (b) an immaterial (spiritual) soul. The ancient Greeks championed this idea in Western civilization, originating from Socrates (d. 399 B.C.) as written by his famous student Plato (d. 347 B.C.), both from Athens. In this view, the physical body is inherently inferior, and the soul is perfect.



Augustine

The great Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were influenced by Platonic thinking. The most important Jewish scholar who introduced the immortal soul doctrine in Judaism was Philo (d. ca. A.D. 50), a philosopher from Alexandria, Egypt. By Jesus' day, most Jews believed in the immortal soul. Origen (d. 253), a Christian thinker from Alexandria, Egypt, was influenced by Philo and introduced the doctrine into Christianity. Although Christianity appears to have largely rejected the concept initially, it was later adopted through the efforts of Augustine (d. 430), the very influential bishop of Hippo in North Africa.

Question #2: How are the Biblical words for “soul” and “spirit” used in Scripture?

Answer: The Hebrew word for “soul” is “nephesh” and occurs 754 times in the Old Testament. The King James' Version translates it as “soul” 472 of those times, but also as 44 other various words. The Greek word for “soul” in the New Testament is “psuche,” the equivalent of the Hebrew “nephesh.” These 2 words are used in 5 different ways, as follows: [NOTE: The texts listed are only representative samples.]

- **The Whole Person**—Genesis 12:5; Joshua 10:28; Leviticus 21:11; 22:14; Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Acts 2:41; 7:14; Romans 13:1.
- **Life**—Exodus 4:19; Joshua 2:13; 9:24; Psalm 143:11; Matthew 2:20; Acts 15:26; Romans 11:3; Philippians 2:30; Revelation 12:11.

- **Center of Emotions**—II Kings 4:27; Job 19:2; Psalm 119:28, 81; Matthew 22:37; John 12:27; Ephesians 6:6; Colossians 3:23.
- **Center of the Will or Intellect**—Leviticus 4:2; Ezekiel 18:4; Micah 6:7.
- **Eternal Life**—Matthew 10:28; John 12:25.

The Hebrew word for “spirit” is “ruach,” which essentially means “air, wind, or air in motion” and occurs 389 times in the Old Testament. The Greek word for “spirit” is “pneuma,” from which the English word “pneumonia” is derived. It’s the equivalent of the Hebrew word “ruach.” These 2 words are used in 4 different ways, as follows: [NOTE: Again, the texts listed are only representative samples.]

- **The Whole Person**—I John 4:1-3.
- **Principle of Life (or Life itself, as “breath”)**—Lamentations 4:20; I Samuel 30:12; James 2:26; Revelation 11:11.
- **Center of Emotions**—Joshua 2:11; Judges 8:3; Proverbs 14:29; Ecclesiastes 7:9; Matthew 5:3; 26:41.
- **Spiritual Attitude Toward God**—Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 1:9; 8:16; Galatians 6:18; Ephesians 4:23-24.

The most important fact to note is that none of the words for “soul” or “spirit” are ever used with the adjective or meaning of “immortal.”

Question #3: How do you explain Genesis 35:18, which speaks of the soul leaving at a person’s death?

Answer: Genesis 35:18 reads, “**And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin**” (NKJV). This text concerns the birth of Jacob’s son Benjamin to his wife Rachel, who died in childbirth. This text doesn’t mean that Rachel’s immortal soul was leaving her body. The Hebrew word here, “nephesh,” is derived from a verb meaning “to breathe.” Remember that man became a “**living soul**” when the breath of life was given to his body (Genesis 2:7). Therefore, when the breath leaves the body, the person becomes a *dead soul*. It’s apparent that the word “soul” here refers to the principle of life, and that the clause “**her soul was departing**” is a metaphor for death. The reverse is true of the widow’s son at Zarephath, of which it’s said that his soul came back to him (I Kings 17:21-22).

Question #4: Didn’t King Saul visit a witch and speak with the dead prophet Samuel?

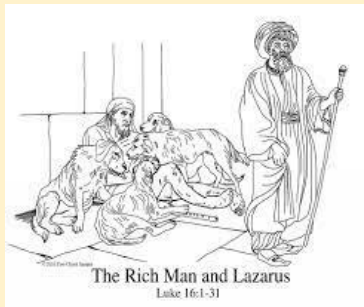
Answer: According to I Samuel 28:3-25, God had rejected King Saul, who was facing a battle with the Philistines. Since the prophet Samuel was dead, Saul went to see the witch at Endor in order to talk to Samuel. He spoke with whom he thought was Samuel, but it wasn’t Samuel. *First*, God had been emphatic in commanding all witches and other mediums be executed in Israel (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10-11).



God wouldn't do that and then allow Saul to speak to Samuel. *Second*, I Samuel 28:14 says that Saul **"perceived it was Samuel"** (NKJV), not that it actually *was* Samuel. *Third*, verses 13-14 says that Samuel's **"spirit ascended...out of the earth...is coming up"** (NKJV). But if Samuel had an immortal soul, wouldn't it have *descended down* from heaven instead of ascending up out of the earth? *Finally*, the voice tells Saul in verse 19 that **"tomorrow you and your sons will be with me"** (NKJV). Really? Would Saul end up in the same eternal place with Samuel after God had already rejected Saul? For all these reasons, the only viable conclusion is that Saul spoke with an evil angel who only *appeared* as Samuel.

Question #5: How should we understand Jesus' account of the Rich Man and Lazarus?

Answer: That story is recorded in Luke 16:19-31. Many scholars insist that it's not a parable because Jesus didn't begin by saying something like "Such and such is like...." However, it obviously uses figurative



language and should thus be interpreted like you would a parable. *First*, neither man is a disembodied spirit, for the man in hell has **"eyes"** and a **"tongue,"** and Lazarus has a **"finger"** (vv. 22-24). *Second*, the Rich Man pleads for Lazarus to come to him and cool his tongue by dipping the tip of his finger in water, which couldn't possibly provide comfort to anyone in hell. *Finally*, the narrow gulf between heaven and hell so that people can talk to each other is obviously also not literal. Therefore, the figurative language means we should treat the story as a parable and look for the one

or two points that the story was intended to convey.

The story has 2 central spiritual points. *First*, it's in *this* lifetime that a person determines his eternal destiny. There's no second chance at salvation after death (vv. 25-26). *Second*, if one doesn't believe the Scriptures, then he won't believe the truth even if one is raised from the dead (vv. 29-31). Therefore, this parable isn't addressing the subject of death or hell at all, so we can't draw any conclusions from it for these subjects.

Question #6: Did Jesus promise the thief on the cross that he'd be with Him in Paradise that very day?

Answer: *First*, remember that there was no punctuation in the Greek manuscripts. Those who added the punctuation later placed a comma *before* the word **"today,"** so that Luke 23:43 reads, **"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise"** (NKJV). But if the comma were placed *after* the word **"today,"** then it would read, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise." The 1st reading makes Jesus say he would be with Him in Paradise on that same day, while the 2nd reading makes Jesus say he would be with Him in Paradise at some unknown point in the future. Fortunately, we don't have to guess where the comma should go. Jesus made that promise on Friday. The next Sunday morning, He told Mary Magdalene that He had **"not yet ascended to My Father"** (John 20:17, NKJV). So, if Jesus didn't go to Paradise on Friday, the thief couldn't have gone to Paradise with Him on that day. Therefore, the comma belongs after the word **"today,"** and this text doesn't teach that the dead go to heaven immediately after death.

Question #7: When Jesus said that God wasn't the God of the dead but of the living, didn't He imply that the patriarchs he mentioned were already living in heaven?

Answer: This statement is found in Matthew 22:23-33, Mark 12:18-27, and Luke 20:27-40. Speaking of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Jesus said that God is **“not the God of the dead, but of the living”** (NKJV). But the context shows that the subject was the resurrection, not the state of man in death. So Jesus was assuring His listeners that those patriarchs would be resurrected. As far as God is concerned, when He promises something, it's as good as already done even if it hasn't happened historically yet (Romans 4:17).



Jacob

Question #8: What did Jesus mean when He said that “whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:26, NKJV)?

Answer: The context here is the resurrection, not only in general terms, but also in the immediate circumstances of the resurrection of Lazarus. Thus, Jesus was teaching that even when believers die, they will be raised in the resurrection. When He said that His followers **“shall never die”** (v. 26), He must have been referring to what the Bible calls the **“second death”** (Revelation 2:11). According to Revelation 20:11-15, the **“second death”** is the death of the wicked at the end of the millennium, from which there is no resurrection. In the meantime, everyone dies the *first* death.

Question #9: What does Philippians 1:23 mean when Paul says he has “a desire to depart and be with Christ” (NKJV)?

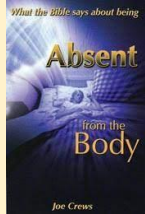
Answer: The text reads, **“For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ”** (NKJV). When he refers to **“between the two,”** Paul means the choice between **“to live”** and **“to die”** (v. 21, NKJV). In verse 23, the Greek word for **“depart”** is related to the word for **“departure”** in II Timothy 4:6, which refers to Paul's imminent death. In II Timothy 4:8, Paul's use of **“that Day and His appearing”** (NKJV) plainly refers to the 2nd Coming of Jesus as the time when the Lord will give him **“the crown of righteousness”** (NKJV). This means that Paul understood that his death would not result in his immediate presence with the Lord. Therefore, the only way to see both statements as consistent with each other is to understand his statement in Philippians 1:23 as reflecting the Biblical teaching that death is like a dreamless sleep, so that there's no consciousness of time for the one who dies. Instead, one moment the person dies, and the next moment as far as his consciousness is concerned, he's in the presence of Jesus. [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guide #22 for the view of death being like a dreamless sleep.]

Question #10: What does II Corinthians 5:8 mean when Paul would rather be “absent from the body and...present with the Lord” (NKJV)?

Answer: Most Christians interpret this verse to mean that the believer goes immediately to heaven when he dies. The following outline of II Corinthians 5:1-8 makes the issue easier to understand:

<u>We Groan</u>	<u>We Desire</u>	<u>We Do Not Want</u>
Earthly house	building from God	naked
This tent	house not made with hands (in heaven)	unclothed
Mortality	life (immortal life)	
In the body	absent from the body	
Absent from the Lord	present with the Lord	

The phrase “**absent from the body**” (NKJV, in the 2nd column) means to be absent from the sin-affected body (in the 1st column) because it can’t be equal to naked or unclothed since those are things we don’t want. Since the 1st column represents this life on earth, and the 2nd column represents what we desire, then the 3rd column must refer to the condition in death—the so-called intermediate step between this old life and eternal life in heaven. This means, then, that death does not place the believer immediately into the presence of the Lord. This is confirmed by the parallel of this passage with Romans 8:22-23:



II Corinthians 5:1-8

We groan
The Spirit as a guarantee
Earnestly desiring
Further clothed

Romans 8:22-23

groan within ourselves
firstfruits
waiting for
redemption of our body

The “**further clothed**” experience (1st column) associated with our future presence with the Lord is equated with the “redemption of our body” (2nd column). Therefore, being with the Lord occurs only after we have received glorified bodies at the 2nd Coming of Jesus.

Question #11: What does Hebrews 9:27 mean when it states that after death comes judgment?

Answer: Hebrews 9:27 reads, “**And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment**” (NKJV). *First*, the author doesn’t actually say that the judgment comes *immediately* after a person’s death. *Second*, note the word “**so**” at the beginning of the next verse: “**so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation**” (v. 28, NKJV). The word “**so**” indicates that verse 28 is related to verse 27 as that which happens in the same way or manner. Note the parallelisms between these 2 verses:

A And as it is appointed for men to die once
 B but after this the judgment
 A¹ so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many (by dying)
 B¹ ...He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation

Just as Jesus didn't return the 2nd time immediately after His death, so people don't go to judgment immediately after their death.

Question #12: Doesn't Peter say that Jesus preached to the spirits in prison during the time He was dead in the tomb?

Answer: That text reads in part, **“being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison...in the days of Noah”** (I Peter 3:18-20, NKJV). Note that the word **“Spirit”** is the Holy Spirit because it was by Him that Jesus was resurrected (Romans 8:11); so it's not Jesus' spirit. The text simply states that Jesus preached by the Holy Spirit through Noah to the people in Noah's day. This is confirmed by the fact that II Peter 2:4-9 says that those who lost their lives in Noah's day are part of the people listed there who are reserved **“under punishment for the day of judgment”** (v. 9, NKJV). In other words, they were regarded as lost in Jesus' day, so there would be no point in preaching to them at that time. Therefore, **“the spirits in prison”** refer to real flesh-and-blood people in Noah's day who were spiritual prisoners of Satan (Psalm 142:7).

Question #13: Doesn't Revelation 6:9-10 mean that the souls of the martyrs are literally in heaven now?

Answer: No. *First*, confinement of souls **“under the altar”** (v. 9, NKJV) is hardly a literal picture. *Second*, the symbolism is explained by the Old Testament sanctuary system, in which the blood of sacrificial animals was partly poured out at the base of the Altar of Burnt Offering (Exodus 29:10-13; 38:1; 40:6, 10, 29; Leviticus 4:7, 10, 18, 25, 30, 34). Leviticus 17:11 says that the soul (or life) of a sacrificial animal is in its blood. So when the blood was poured out at the base of that altar, it was the same thing as its soul or life being poured there. Therefore, this language in Revelation symbolically points to Christian martyrs as having been “sacrificed” to God and says nothing about the state of man in death. The statement there reflects the parallel of Abel's voice crying out from the ground (Genesis 4:10).



Altar of Burnt Offering