

# Jehovah's Witnesses, Soul Sleep, and the State of the Dead

By Lorri MacGregor

Death is a fascinating subject. We are born to die. We will die—early, mid, or late life or any day in between, expected or unexpected. All of us are a heartbeat away from eternity. Unless the Lord comes and takes us away while we are still living, we will face death. Death is the last enemy we will face. No wonder 1 Corinthians 15:26 says, “The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”

Lest I sound too gloomy, let me state that all this pessimism on the subject of death is for unbelievers or the uninformed only. The Christian has a different attitude, which is stated in Philippians 1:21: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” We as Christians know that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” as 2 Corinthians 5:8 says.

It is not so in the world in general, nor in the world of the cults. Let's take a minute to look at the variations on the teaching of annihilationism taught in concert with “soul sleep.”

Annihilation comes from the Latin word “*nihil*” meaning “Nothing.” In other words, the human soul ceases to exist at death. There are even three variations on this teaching.

1. Materialism: Gone, done, nothing further—annihilated.
2. Conditional immortality: Teaches that although humans are naturally mortal, God imparts to the redeemed immortality, but the rest of humanity is annihilated completely.
3. Annihilationism proper: Man is created immortal, fulfills his destiny in salvation except for the reprobates who fall into nonexistence either through a direct act of God or through the corrosive effect of evil—either way they cease to exist.

There is another view, Universalism, which teaches that God will finally redeem everybody.

The cults usually fall into condition 2, “Conditional immortality” or 3, “Annihilation-ism proper, or some condition similar to the two—some can be saved after death, the rest are annihilated. Any view encompassing annihilationism involves the denial of the immortality of the soul. Therefore at death, the soul either “sleeps” or is out of existence, since the soul is only the person, nothing more.

Jehovah's Witnesses have this to say under the heading “Condition of Human Dead” in their *Aid to Bible Understanding*, page 431: “The dead are shown to be ‘conscious of nothing at all’ and the death state to be one of complete inactivity. (Eccl. 9:5, 10; Ps. 146:4). In both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures death is likened to sleep, a fitting comparison, not only due to the unconscious condition of the dead, but also because of the hope of an awakening through the resurrection....”

So, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, and also the Seventh-day Adventists who have common roots, the dead are sleeping, the soul also dead, until such time that God “awakens” them through “resurrection.” Realize that by “resurrection” they really mean “re-creation” since the person is, in reality, cloned from God's memory.

To the Jehovah's Witnesses and groups like them, the soul is just the person (You say “poor soul” you mean the person) and the spirit is just their breath, nothing more. Let's turn to the Bible to get at the truth about the soul and the spirit.

## The Soul and the Spirit

Are the soul and the spirit the same? If not, what makes them different? Many believe that the terms “soul” and “spirit” are interchangeable terms, when, in fact, the Bible shows a difference.

We are created in the image of God according to the Bible. Just as our God is a Triune Being, so are we. We are composed of Body, Soul, and Spirit. Let’s confirm this fact by considering 1 Thessalonians 5:23: “Now may the God of Peace Himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

So to be sanctified **entirely** and preserved **complete**, our total self is involved—body, soul, and spirit.

## Dividing the Soul and Spirit

The soul and the spirit are not the same, as the Bible speaks of a division between the two. Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Not only is this Scripture a marvelous revelation of the power of the word of God to change lives, but it shows that the piercing power of the word can divide between the soul and spirit. Thus, they are not synonymous terms; they are different.

## The Body

We all know what the body is, namely our flesh and bones, circulation and nervous systems, governed by our brain, and dependent on the good functioning of our heart and lungs. It is the physical us.

## The Soul

What, then is the Soul? The soul is **not** the body, nor the spirit, but is everything else these two are not. We will define the spirit next, but in brief, the soul is our intellect, our personality, in fact, our identity. The first mention of the soul in the Bible is in Genesis 2:7, where it is recorded that Adam **became** a living soul. Notice that Adam did not **receive** a soul, Adam became a soul. Many Bible translations interchange the words “soul,” “person,” and “life,” and this is correct since a soul can touch according to Leviticus 5:2, a soul can commit a sin according to Leviticus 5:15, and a soul can also eat according to Leviticus 7:18. Psalms 42:2 records that our soul can “thirst for God.”

## The Soul Departing

Genesis 35:18 records concerning Rachel in childbirth that “it came about as her soul was departing, for she died, that she called him...Benjamin.”

So, the soul goes out at death. We would reasonably expect that if the soul goes out at death as the Bible teaches, then if it returns, the person would live. In 1 Kings 17:21,22 Elijah the prophet entreats the Lord to raise a boy from the dead.

“Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord my God, I pray Thee, let the child’s life [or Soul] return to him’ and the Lord heard the voice of Elijah and the life [soul] of the child returned to him and he revived.”

Isaiah 53:12 records that Christ “poured out His soul unto death.” The soul goes out at death according to the Bible.

### **Where Does the Soul Go?**

Some have attempted to prove from scripture that the soul goes out to annihilation. This is false. They use for their so-called Scriptural proof the scripture in Ezekiel 18:4, which reads, “The soul who sins will die.” The word “die” in the Bible does not signify annihilation as the cults teach, or so-called “soul sleep” in an unconscious state.

Following our fleshly death and the going out of our soul, we will spend a conscious eternity in one of two places, just as Jesus taught. We go to the grave. Proverbs 23:14 tells us if we discipline our children properly, we will deliver their soul from Sheol or the grave. Prophetically it was said of Jesus in Psalms 16:10: For Thou will not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow thy Holy One to undergo decay.”

So, the grave is not the end, there is yet a deliverance out of it.

### **Two Destinations for the Soul**

The soul departing for Sheol (Hades) could end up finally in the dreadful Gehenna, the Lake of Fire: “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades [Sheol, grave], gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged every one of them according to their deeds.” (Revelation 20:13)

The other, much better alternative destination is in heaven. Revelation 6:9 records this scene in heaven: “And when He broke the fifth seal I saw underneath the altar the **souls** of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained.”

Notice, please, that here were persons who had been **slain**, that is, their bodies had been killed, and yet their souls were safe in heaven. Some cult groups teach that the soul is the body and suffers death. Not so, and not true. Matthew 10:28 reads, “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.”

### **Eternal Destinations**

It is just as Jesus said of the two classes, first of the goats or the unbelieving wicked, “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).

Our soul will spend eternity somewhere. Have you decided where yours will reside?

### **What is the Spirit of Man?**

What now is the **spirit** that the Bible talks about, and in fact gives prominence to over the soul and body? We should be spirit, soul, and body—in that order—according to 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

### **Is the Spirit “Breath”?**

First off, the teaching of the cult groups that our spirit is merely our breath is ridiculous, and not borne out by a careful examination of Scriptures. What does the Bible teach concerning the spirit of man?

Zechariah 12:1 says this: “Thus declares the Lord who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him...”

Man does not **become** a spirit, but **has** a spirit within him. Isaiah 26:9 says this: “...at night my soul longs for Thee, indeed my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently.”

Our spirit is **not** breath, for the spirit of man is capable of thought. 1 Corinthians 2:11 says, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man, except the spirit of the man, which is in him?”

Our spirit can also “perceive” just as Mark 2:8 says of Jesus, “and immediately Jesus, perceiving in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?”

Ephesians suggests that we renew not only our minds, but our spirits. Clearly, our spirit within us is **not** our breath.

### **Are Spirit and Soul the Same?**

The spirit of man is the same as the soul in some respects. We are taught in James 2:26 that our body is dead without the spirit. Furthermore, when our spirit returns, our bodies come alive again. (Luke 8:54,55). Nowhere in Scripture does it speak of the spirit being destroyed or dying as it does the soul. What then happens to the spirit within us at our death?

### **The Spirit at Death**

Ecclesiastes 12:7 teaches that the spirit returns to God on death. For this reason we find that David committed his spirit to the Lord in Psalms 31:5. Upon His death, Jesus cried out, “Father into Thy hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46). The Christian martyr Stephen also committed his spirit to the Lord when he died (Acts 7:59).

### **Committing our Spirits to the Lord**

What a good pattern for us all to follow! We can commit our spirits to the Lord upon our death in full confidence, provided we have been dealt with spiritually by the Lord prior to our death. We need to experience personally Romans 8:16, “The Spirit, Himself bears witness to our spirit that we are children of God.”

We have all been born once physically, but we all need to be born again spiritually (John 3:3-7). We need the Holy Spirit to inhabit our spirit, and this is what happens when we invite Jesus Christ into our lives, hearts, and spirits. No wonder Paul said to the godly man Timothy, “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (2 Tim. 4:22).

### **The Complete Man**

In conclusion, we state again that we are a triune being of spirit, soul, and body. We are born in the reverse order, but when we are born again through the Spirit of God, we can become as God intended us to be, spirit, soul, and body.

In Scripture, remember, that as the spirit goes, so goes the soul. Even our rebellious body of flesh can be brought into line through the power of the Spirit of God. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”

We are not complete unless our spirits are renewed. We will not live abundantly if our spirits are unsatisfied. Come to Jesus today, and be satisfied, spirit, soul, and body.

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