

The Sleep of Death

by Bill Crews

Does “Sleep” Equal “Unconsciousness”?

Man is both a *physical* being and a *spiritual* being. The death of the body, the “**tabernacle**” of the spirit, brings a separation of body and spirit — the spirit leaves the body, and that spirit (or soul, or inward man) still exists. I believe that the Bible teaches that it has **conscious existence**. That, however, brings up the question: “**Why, then, does the Bible speak of death as a ‘sleep’?**” Let us consider the matter of death as a sleep.

Death Called A “Sleep”

In the Scriptures physical death is regarded as or likened to a sleep. The word “*sleep*” is often used of “*taking rest in sleep*” (John 11:13), but it is also used of death (“*Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep*”; “*now Jesus had spoken of his death*” — John 11:11, 13). David wrote: “*Lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death*” (Psalm 13:3). Some died in their sleep; some have been slain in their sleep. They passed directly from taking rest in sleep to the sleep of death. The Scriptures put it like this: “*And sleep a perpetual sleep, and not wake, saith Jehovah*” (Jeremiah 51:39, 57). When various Bible characters suffered physical death, it is said that they “*slept with their fathers*” or that they “*fell asleep*” (1 Kings 1:21; 2:10; Acts 13:36; 7:60; 1 Kings 11:43; 14:20; etc.). When Christ comes again, all people will either be awake (alive) or asleep (dead), alive physically or dead physically (1 Thessalonians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 15:51).

Does “Sleep” Mean “Annihilation, Non-Existence”?

The various words rendered “**death**” in the Bible have the basic meaning of “separation,” **NOT** “annihilation” or “non-existence.” Physical death is a separation of body and spirit; spiritual death is a separation of man from God, a loss of communion with God. (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words* says, “It never denotes non-existence.”) In an effort to make the Scriptures appear to support their doctrines, there are some (Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and others) who try to make “death” mean “annihilation” or “nonexistence,” and who appeal to the fact that the Bible calls death a “sleep.” They speak of **the soul** sleeping and point out that one is not conscious of anything while sleeping, but *Vine’s* says, “It is evident the word ‘sleep,’ where applied to departed Christians, is not intended to convey the idea that the spirit is unconscious.” Even if they were right, a soul that was sleeping would not be the same as a soul that had been annihilated. It would still have existence.

But What Is It That Is Said To “Sleep”?

Daniel 12:2 says: “*And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.*” It is the body that sleeps in the dust of the earth, not the spirit. It is the body that shall be awakened, not the soul or spirit. When the rich man died, his body was buried in the dust of the earth, but his soul was in Hades in torment (Luke 16:22-23). When Jesus was crucified, His body was prepared for burial by loving hands and placed in a tomb, but His soul was in Hades until soul and body were reunited the morning of His resurrection (Acts 2:24, 27, 31-32). It is of the body the figure of “*sleep*” is used, not the spirit or soul. The Greek verb (**KOIMAOMAI** — “to fall asleep”) that is used most often in a metaphorical sense of death is from a verb (**KEIMAI**) which means “to lie down.” It is used in this *metaphorical* sense because there is so much similarity between a body lying asleep and a body lying dead. *Vine’s* says, “That the body alone is in view in this metaphor is evident,” and then proceeds to give reasons why this is true. The body is to be awakened; the body is to be raised from the dead. The dead in Christ are those who have “*fallen asleep in Jesus*,” and these shall “*rise*” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Matthew 27:52 says, “*And the tombs were opened, and many **bodies** of the saints that had fallen asleep were raised.*” The body is said to sleep, not the soul or spirit. **What tremendous events lie ahead for you and me and all others!**