Q&A: Do you believe in Soul Sleep after death?

Megan asks:

Do you believe in soul-sleep after death, where we will awake at the second coming, or that our spirits will be with God immediately after our death? I Googled this the other day, and found scriptural foundation for both answers. What does the church teach? What do you believe?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]



Thanks for the question, someone asked me something very similar a number of years ago: Q&A – As an Anglican, what do you believe [about the intermediate state]? and I still agree with the substance of my answer. The focus of that answer is the "What does the church teach?" question and goes to some of the doctrinal formularies, with some of my personal conclusions. My position is that after death we will be "with God" in some way, and this is prior to the Lord's return and the time of *general resurrection*.

Turning to the "scriptural foundation" that you explored – there isn't an absolute-proof-text to turn to. The difficulty is, of course, that the focus of the gospel has more to do with our *present* state and our *final* state. The question of any *intermediate* state is a technical question that isn't precisely addressed.

There are, of course, many biblical references in which those who have died are referred to as *sleeping* – e.g *Psalm 13:3*, *1*

Kings 2:10, *John 11:11* etc. etc. I am unable to find any reference, however, that suggests that this is anything more than imagery. In fact, it is powerful imagery – *sleep* as an image of death, from the point of view of those left behind, speaks of both the *absence* of a person in death, and also the *temporary* nature of it in the gospel scheme of things. It is the sense of "they are gone, but we will be reunited one day."

On the other hand, there are other descriptions of post-death experiences that make very little, if any, sense if that experience is limited to a form of slumber. Jesus' *assurance* to the thief on the cross, that "today, you will be with me in paradise" is the famous example. Similarly, in Revelation 6 we hear the voices of those who have been martyred, *crying out in a loud voice*,"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Clearly, this presumes a post-death, pre-resurrection-and-judgement, conscious existence!

Of course, one of the conceptual problems is as to what this non-sleeping intermediate state is actually like. This question goes to *theological anthropology,* i.e. what is a human being after all? Are we soul, spirit, and body, and what does that mean? Where is our *personhood?* After all, Christian thought emphasises the value of the *embodied* self. We affirm, for instance, that a violation of someone's body is not just the wounding of flesh, it is an injury done *to their person*. It is why we (along with *Jesus*) *mourn death,* which is (at the very least), the ending of bodily function. In the final state we are looking forward not towards an eternal disembodied state, but towards an *immortally glorified* bodily existence, an *"eternal house"*. Moreover, this is exactly what we understand of Jesus' currrent existence as a physically resurrected human being: he has a human body that is real and glorified, and the first fruits of our final eternal life.

So how do we conceive of ourselves in a disembodied state, if this is what happens immediately after death? This is where I don't have a complete answer. Some resolve it by suggesting that there is no intermediate state at all – sleeping or otherwise – and it's just that time works differently in paradise and our experience of death is to jump ahead to the general resurrection. I'm not convinced. Others suggest (and I lean this way) that it *is* possible to conceive of personhood without physical referent, especially in an interim or temporary sense. We *are* much more than our bodies: Close your eyes and imagine someone who is very close to you… you will be thinking of and "experiencing" them as much more than just the recollection of their physical face, you are touching upon a deeper sense of who they are.

The biggest question, however, (as it is for many theological things), is **"so what?"** What difference does it make to the gospel itself, to our proclamation of the gospel, or to our experience of living out the gospel? In my reflection I am taking to think about how, while this world is our home, being with Jesus is even more so. Our *"enduring city"* is not here. As Gill and I pass through more and more seasons of life, especially difficult ones, we get a growing sense of what Paul alludes to in *2 Corinthians 5*. We are of "good courage" and make it our purpose to please Jesus in our earthly life. Yet, we "long to be at home with him" even if that is "absent from the body."

So here is good news to me (although it is not the whole of the good news): I know that, when I die, I shall be at home with the Lord. And it is hard to think of such a joyous existence being of nothing but sleep.