

Are the Dead Conscious?

A Sequential Survey of the Biblical Writers

Tim Warner © Bereans Bible Institute

JOB had the distinction of being the most righteous man on earth.¹ He was “*blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil.*”² God Himself praised Job’s righteousness,³ and communicated with him in an audible voice.⁴ Job lived before Moses, at about the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, Job’s views on death and immortality are the oldest direct evidence from the Bible. His views were not tainted with paganism, but reflected hope based on direct knowledge from God.

When at his lowest, under the affliction from Satan which God had permitted, Job lamented his own birth, and longed for death as relief.

Job 3:11-13

11 “Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? 12 Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? 13 For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; Then I would have been at rest.”

Had Job died as an infant, he would have been “asleep.” Here we have the first time in Scripture that death is referred to as “sleep,” and is associated with stillness, quietness, and rest. Yet, this ought not to be mistaken for a state of bliss, as Job went on to explain.

Job 10:18-22

18 ‘Why then have You brought me out of the womb? Oh, that I had perished and no eye had seen me! 19 I would have been as though I had not been. I would have been carried from the womb to the grave. 20 Are not my days few? Cease! Leave me alone, that I may take a little comfort, 21 Before I go to the place from which I shall not return, To the land

¹ Job 1:8

² Job 1:1

³ Job 1:8

⁴ Job 38:1

of darkness and the shadow of death, 22 A land as dark as darkness itself, As the shadow of death, without any order, Where even the light is like darkness.'"

Death is *"the land of darkness"* and *"without any order,"* where *"even the light is like darkness."* This is not a description of a blissful conscious existence, but rather nothingness, as is indicated in the statement: *"I would have been as though I had not been."* Obviously, Job did not believe in the *"immortality of the soul,"* nor did he believe in an intermediate state of any kind other than returning to dust. Death was equivalent to never having existed. In chapter 14, he again spoke of death as falling asleep, but this time with the hope of awakening in the resurrection.

Job 14:10-15

10 But man dies and is laid away; Indeed he breathes his last And where is he?

11 As water disappears from the sea, And a river becomes parched and dries up,

12 So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, They will not awake Nor be roused from their sleep.

13 "Oh, that You would hide me in the grave, That You would conceal me until Your wrath is past, That You would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

14 If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, Till my change comes.

15 You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands.

The sleep of death will not be disturbed until the appointed time, the renovation of the heavens and earth.⁵ Job looked to the resurrection when God would *"remember"* him. God is not involved with the dead at all. Job believed that when awakened from the sleep of death, he will be *"changed."* Paul used this term in the same way when speaking of the resurrection of the righteous.⁶ God will *"call"* Job forth, and Job will *"answer,"* because God desires *"the work of [His] hands."* Job was created in the image of God who desires to preserve his creature in the end. Thus in Job's view, there is no intermediate state of conscious existence. The only hope for a man facing death is resurrection, because of God's grace and His desire to give man a future beyond death. We see this confidence in the resurrection as man's only hope again in the following passage.

⁵ This expression refers to the passing away of the present order, (not the physical creation itself), when the creation will be made new again, as in the Garden of Eden. See Isaiah 65:17-25.

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:51

Job 19:25-27

*25 For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth;
26 And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,
27 Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*

The hope of the resurrection of the righteous was the resurrection to immortality according to Job. Yet, the wicked will also be raised to stand before the judgment.

Job 21:30

30 For the wicked are reserved for the day of doom; They shall be brought out on the day of wrath.

The earliest testimony in Scripture concerning the state of the dead is unmistakably “*conditional immortality*,” that the resurrection is the only means for reward or punishment. The dead are not conscious. Man is not inherently immortal.

DAVID was a prophet of God,⁷ and “*a man after God’s own heart*.”⁸ He agreed with Job in every detail. The dead are asleep and have no conscious existence at all. In fact, the righteous dead do not even remember God, nor can they praise Him. Death is a state of non-existence according to the Psalms.

Psalm 6:5

5 For in death there is no remembrance of You; In the grave who will give You thanks?

Psalm 13:3

3 Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death;

Psalm 30:9

9 What profit is there in my blood, When I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise You? Will it declare Your truth?

⁷ Acts 2:30

⁸ 1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22

Psalm 88:9-12

9 My eye wastes away because of affliction. LORD, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You. 10 Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You? Selah. 11 Shall Your loving kindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction? 12 Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

Notice the similarities between David and Job. Both viewed death as sleep. Both viewed the grave as a place of total darkness. Yet, David adds terms like “*the place of destruction*” and “*the land of forgetfulness.*” Such terminology is fitting only for death being viewed as the enemy of the righteous. This is why, when describing the resurrection of Christians, Paul burst forth with joyful anticipation: “*So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’⁹ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’¹⁰”¹¹ For the righteous, “victory” over death and Hades is realized when the Last Trumpet sounds, and Jesus Himself calls forth the dead out of their graves, just as He did with Lazarus!¹² Neither Job nor David viewed death for the righteous as a happy existence in a state of awareness. The Psalms reflect a kind of non-existence, where nothing is remembered, and reasoning ceases.*

Psalm 115:17-18

17 The dead do not praise the LORD, Nor any who go down into silence. 18 But we will bless the LORD From this time forth and forevermore. Praise the LORD!

Psalm 146:3-4

*3 Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help.
4 His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that very day his plans perish.*

⁹ Quoting from Isaiah 25:8 LXX

¹⁰ Quoting from Hosea 13:14 LXX

¹¹ 1 Cor 15:54-55

¹² It is significant that Paul based his point that the enemy of the righteous, death and Hades, is defeated when the resurrection occurs, is based squarely on two Old Testament passages of Scripture. This is proof that the Old Testament view of death and resurrection is consistent with Paul’s teaching. Paul did not introduce a different view, or he would not be able to cite such OT passages as proof.

The word translated “plans” in the NKJV/NIV is rendered “thoughts” in the KJV/NASB. The Hebrew word is “eshtonah” (#6250), which according to Strongs & BDB Hebrew Lexicon means: “*thinking, thoughts, contemplation.*” The LXX translates it as “*διαλογισμος*,” (lit. through-logic), also meaning “*contemplation, reasoning.*” It is used several times in Scripture, always in reference to reasoning of the human mind.¹³ The meaning of this Psalm is that a man’s cognition ceases on the day of his death. By translating it as “plans” the translators give the false impression that the *implementation* of the dead man’s thinking comes to nothing, thereby giving cover to the false view that man continues to contemplate and be aware after death. But this translation is incorrect.

SOLOMON, David’s son, God’s chosen king, the wisest man prior to Jesus,¹⁴ held the same views on death as his father and Job. The book of Ecclesiastes, through which Solomon left his wisdom for the nation of Israel, contemplates mankind and his enemy, death. It answers the most important questions plaguing man: What is the point of life? And, is there really justice (reward or punishment) in the end? Having the right answer to these questions provides the motivation to live righteously, to enjoy life’s simple pleasures, and to refrain from the pursuit of things that have no eternal value. That the dead are not conscious is stated plainly by Solomon.

Eccl. 9:3-6

3 This is an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. 4 But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 5 For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. 6 Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; Nevermore¹⁵ will they have a share In anything done under the sun.

Solomon contrasted the knowledge of the living with the knowledge of the dead. The living are aware that they will die, because they can reason. But the dead know nothing at all. Thus, they are not aware of anything, and do not hope in the resurrection. Even

¹³ Dan. 2:30; Dan. 4:19; Dan. 5:6; Dan. 7:28; Luke 2:35; Luke 5:22; Luke 6:7-8; Rom. 1:21, James 2:4

¹⁴ Matthew 12:42

¹⁵ “Nevermore” is a bad translation. This English term means to infinity. But the Hebrew and Greek say “*until the age*,” a phrase that refers to the time when the creation is renewed.

their emotions die with them, including love, hate, and envy. The saying, *“A living dog is better than a dead lion,”* expresses the idea that the dead are not in a glorious or pleasant state, since nothing of their conscious existence remains. That *“they have no more reward”* proves beyond doubt that the dead are not in a happy *“Paradise,”* as those who teach *“immortality of the soul”* claim. Leave no doubt that the dead are unconscious, Solomon adds in verse 10, *“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.”* The meaning of *“knowledge”* is obvious. But the word translated *“device”* is *“λογισμος,”* the same word used in Psalm 146:4 (with the preposition *“δια”* {through} as a prefix). Again, this is a term that means reasoning, contemplation, or cognition. Solomon denounced all forms of mental faculty (reasoning, knowledge, and wisdom) for the dead. *“Knowledge”* is information stored in the brain as memory. *“Wisdom”* is the understanding of knowledge. And *“reasoning”* is the devising activity of the brain in using knowledge and wisdom. None of these things exist for the dead according to Solomon. All cognitive activity ceases when a person dies.

The wisest man on earth stated that death for man is the same as for animals. No one would suppose that animals remain conscious after death, or have immortal ghosts.

Eccl. 3:17-21

17 I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.”

18 I said in my heart, “Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.” 19 For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. 20 All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. 21 Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?

The word *“spirit”* in verse 21 is the same word as *“breath”* in verse 19 (in both the Hebrew and the Greek), and ought to be translated *“breath”* in both verses. There can be no doubt that Solomon was referencing the creation of man in Genesis 2:7, where God breathed into man the *“breath of life”* and he became a *“living soul.”* The reason

Solomon said that at death the “breath” of man goes upward and the “breath” of animals goes down to the earth is obvious from verse 17: *“God shall judge the righteous and the wicked.”* The animals will not be resurrected for judgment, punishment, or reward. But man will be resurrected to stand before the judgment. Thus, God retrieves the “breath of life” which he gave to each man so that He can raise each one from the dead at the appointed time.¹⁶ *“All are from the dust, and all return to dust.”* Solomon confirms this again just a few chapters later: *“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the breath will return to God who gave it.”*¹⁷ There is no room for a ghost or “immortal soul” in the Scriptures.

ISAIAH was a prophet of God. He referred to the tombs of the great kings using the language of “sleep” for death. *“All the kings of the nations, All of them, sleep in glory, Everyone in his own house.”*¹⁸ In contrast, the “King of Babylon” will be *“cast out of your grave like an abominable branch, Like the garment of those who are slain, Thrust through with a sword, Who go down to the stones of the pit, Like a corpse trodden underfoot. You will not be joined with them in burial, Because you have destroyed your land and slain your people. The brood of evildoers shall never be named.”*¹⁹

Isaiah was sent to king Hezekiah to deliver a somber message: Get your house in order, because you are going to die. Isaiah then recorded Hezekiah’s prayer, pleading with God not to take his life. Hezekiah’s appeal was based on the fact that the dead cannot praise God (in agreement with David), and the dead cannot *“hope for Your truth.”* Hezekiah appealed to God to extend his life so that he could continue to praise him, to hope in Gods truth, and to declare his works.

Isaiah 38:12-19

12 My life span is gone, Taken from me like a shepherd’s tent; I have cut off my life like a weaver. He cuts me off from the loom; From day until night You make an end of me.

13 I have considered until morning — Like a lion, So He breaks all my bones; From day until night You make an end of me.

¹⁶ When a man dies, the breath of life returns to God, and the body returns to dust. This is exactly the reverse of the creation of man. Cf. Gen. 2:7.

¹⁷ Eccl. 12:7

¹⁸ Isa 14:18

¹⁹ Isaiah 14:19-20

17 Indeed it was for my own peace That I had great bitterness; But You have lovingly delivered my soul from the pit of corruption, For You have cast all my sins behind Your back. 18 For Sheol cannot thank You, Death cannot praise You; Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your truth. 19 The living, the living man, he shall praise You, As I do this day; The father shall make known Your truth to the children.

God did not challenge Hezekiah's claim that only the living could praise Him or hope in God. Instead, God honored his request and extended his life for fifteen more years so that he could continue to praise God for His works, hope in Him, and instruct his children in the ways of God.

DANIEL the prophet received many visions and dreams from God, and was repeatedly visited by angels. Daniel's prophecies are consistent with all that we have seen. The only hope for the dead is resurrection to immortality. The dead are not conscious, but asleep, just as Job, David, and Isaiah indicated.

Daniel 12:2

2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Not only did Daniel refer to death as sleep, but also to resurrection as awakening, as did Job.²⁰ It is indisputable that the "sleep" of death in these Old Testament passages means that all life and cognitive function ceases entirely. Therefore, when the New Testament writers used precisely the same "sleep" and "awaken" terms to describe death and resurrection, they simply could not have had a completely different concept from what was revealed through Job, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and Daniel.

JESUS also spoke of death as "sleep." When Jarius' daughter died, Jesus said, "*The child is not dead, but sleeping.*"²¹ This statement was meant to reference the Old Testament teaching regarding death as sleep, because sleep implies eventual awakening – resurrection. When Lazarus died, Jesus made one of the clearest statements to His disciples concerning the state of the dead. "*Our friend Lazarus sleeps,*

²⁰ Job 14:12

²¹ Mark 5:39

but I go that I may wake him up.”²² We are then told, “However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.”²³ How would the disciples understand such use of terminology unless it was based on the Old Testament precedent? And this precedent unquestionably portrays the sleep of the dead as being completely unconscious. One of Jesus’ disciples, Matthew, also portrayed death as “sleep”: “And the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.”²⁴ Should we suppose that Matthew had a completely different understanding of death as “sleep” than the very Old Testament saints whom we have surveyed, and whom Matthew said arose from “sleep?” Luke referred to death as “sleep” also, recording Stephen’s death as: “And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”²⁵

PAUL, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, spoke of death as sleep and resurrection as awakening more than any other writer. Luke recorded that in his speech in the synagogue of Antioch, Paul said: “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption.”²⁶ It is absurd to suppose that Paul would ascribe a kind of conscious “sleep” to David when in fact David himself indicated that the dead are not conscious!

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: “For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.”²⁷ When discussing the witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection who had already died, he wrote: “the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”²⁸ He referred to the same group again, saying that if there is no resurrection, “then those who have fallen asleep have perished.” How could Paul say the departed saints have already “perished” if he thought they were ghosts living in heaven or some paradise? Unless there is a resurrection, then the sleeping saints no longer exist according to Paul. In the same chapter, he wrote: “Christ has risen, and become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep,”²⁹ and, “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”³⁰

²² John 11:11

²³ John 11:13

²⁴ Matthew 27:52

²⁵ Acts 7:60

²⁶ Acts 13:36

²⁷ 1 Cor. 11:30.

²⁸ 1 Cor. 15:6

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:20

³⁰ 1 Cor. 15:51

In his epistles to the Thessalonians, Paul again referred to death as sleep: *“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.”*³¹ In the next verse he wrote: *“For if we believe that Jesus died and arose, in this way God, through Jesus, will lead forth together with Him those who fell asleep.”*³² Immediately following this, he wrote: *“... we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep.”*³³ Paul also repeatedly used the term “awaken” (Greek – *εγείρω*) in reference to the resurrection, including Jesus’ own resurrection.³⁴

PETER also spoke of Jesus as having been “awakened”³⁵ in resurrection. Like Paul, he referred to the saints of the Old Testament as being “asleep.” *“Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’”*³⁶ Granted, Peter was recording what future scoffers would say. Yet, the problem with the scoffers’ remarks was not that the fathers were “asleep,” but rather the denial of coming judgment. Again, the “fathers” who “fell asleep” were the very men quoted previously who stated in no uncertain terms that in the sleep of death there is no remembrance of God, no reasoning, knowledge, wisdom, or even emotions. The dead are in a state of nothingness, having returned to the dust, the “breath of life” having returned to God, and kept by Him for resurrection.³⁷

The concept of death as sleep, and resurrection as being awakened, so plainly stated by Job, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and Daniel, is the basis for all of the New Testament similar references by Jesus and His Apostles. The Bible does not contradict itself. Harmony is essential between the prophets and the Apostles if both reported revelation from the same God.

³¹ 1 Thess. 4:13

³² 1 Thess. 4:14 LGV Some versions have “sleep in Jesus,” which is incorrect. The preposition is “*διὰ*” not “*εν*.”

³³ 1 Thess. 4:15

³⁴ Rom. 4:24-25; Rom. 6:4,9; Rom. 8:11,34; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 1 Cor. 15:4,12-17,20,29,32,35,42-44,52; 2 Cor. 1:9; 2 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 5:15; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 2:8.

³⁵ 1 Peter 1:21

³⁶ 2 Peter 3:3-4

³⁷ See Ezekiel 37:9-13