

# What Happens When We Die?

## **Introduction**

One of the most important questions, that all religions try to answer, is the question of: “What happens when we die?” In particular, most religions attempt to explain if human beings have *any* hope of living again, after our bodies die.

Most Christian denominations believe that all human beings have “immortal souls”. According to this belief, the soul is some sort of *invisible presence*, which is contained *inside* our bodies while we are alive, but which *leaves* our bodies – and keeps on living – when our bodies die.

In addition, according to that doctrine, the soul is the “real you”; and as a result, people are still *conscious* after their bodies die – because their souls are still living.

The question is, is the “immortal soul” doctrine listed anywhere in Scripture? This document will discuss what Scripture has to say about the soul – and about what happens when we die. Unless otherwise indicated, all verses are from the King James Version of the Bible.

## **What is the soul?**

To start with, let’s see what the soul is. The Hebrew word which is translated as soul is *nephesh*, and the Greek equivalent is *psuche*. The following verse gives us an indication of what, exactly, the soul is.

### **Genesis 2:7:**

<sup>7</sup>And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

As we can see, two things happened, when God created Adam. First, God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground. In other words, God initially created Adam’s physical body. Adam’s body was *not* alive at that point, though – because his body was dead. In other words, at that point, Adam was a corpse.

Then, God breathed the “breath of life” into Adam’s physical body. When God did that, Adam became a living soul.

From the above information, we can see that Adam did not have a soul – he **was** a soul. In other words, as soon as the breath of life is placed into a person’s body, that person **becomes** a living soul.

From the information found in Scripture, a concise definition of a “soul” is: a conscious being, or simply “consciousness”. Basically, when the breath of life is added to a person’s body, that person becomes a living, conscious being – i.e., he becomes a soul.

Some of the verses that support the definition of the soul as “consciousness” are as follows:

**Psalms 31:9 (ESV):**

<sup>9</sup> Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul (consciousness) and my body also.

**Proverbs 16:24 (ESV):**

<sup>24</sup> Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul (consciousness) and health to the body.

The verse in Psalms indicates that stress causes *problems* for people – both mental (consciousness) problems, and physical (body) problems. The verse in Proverbs indicates that being nice to people provides both mental and physical *benefits* to people. (Interestingly, the medical community is finally beginning to verify both of those items – items that David and Solomon wrote about almost 3,000 years ago!)

In addition, consider this verse, from the apostle Peter:

**1 Peter 2:11:**

<sup>11</sup> Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly (body) lusts, which war against the soul (consciousness);

In the above verse, Peter tells us that our bodily desires can affect our consciousness (i.e., our souls). I suspect that everyone can relate to that statement. The apostle Paul echoes that sentiment as follows:

**Romans 7:25b (ESV):**

<sup>25</sup> So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind (consciousness, or soul), but with my flesh (body) I serve the law of sin.

So, it appears that a “soul” is basically a person’s “consciousness”. That is, when the breath of life is added to a person’s body, that person *becomes* a conscious being – i.e., he *becomes* a soul.

**What is the spirit?**

The “breath of life” is sometimes referred to as “spirit” in Scripture. This spirit is not the Holy Spirit; instead, it is simply the “energy”, or “life force”, which animates our physical bodies.

The Hebrew word for “spirit” that refers to the breath of life is *ruach*; and the Greek equivalent is *pneuma*. Both *ruach* and *pneuma* denote “air”, “wind”, or *breath* – so it makes sense that those words would be used to describe the *breath* of life.

As noted earlier, when the spirit is added to a physical body, a “soul” (conscious being) comes into existence. The following verse describes what happens when the spirit *stops* animating a person’s body:

**James 2:26:**

<sup>26</sup>For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

The above verse tells us that physical bodies cannot live without the spirit (a.k.a. the “breath of life”). Basically, when the spirit *stops* animating a physical body, that body *dies*.

A simple analogy for the spirit is electricity, flowing through a light bulb. As long as electricity *is* flowing through a light bulb, the bulb remains illuminated. As soon as electricity *stops* flowing through a light bulb, though, the bulb goes dark – or “dies”.

The above analogy is very similar to the spirit, animating our bodies – because our nervous systems use *electrochemical impulses*, to send signals through our bodies. So, as long as the spirit *is* active in a person – and is therefore causing electrochemical impulses to flow through his body – that person remains a living, conscious being. As soon as the spirit *stops* being active in a person, though, those impulses *stop* flowing through that person’s body – which causes that person to *die*.

**Are souls immortal?**

As noted in the introduction, most churches believe that the soul is immortal – i.e., that the soul cannot die. However, the phrase “immortal soul” does not appear *anywhere* in Scripture. So, let’s see what Scripture *does* say about the soul.

First, we know from Genesis 2:7 that a “soul” – i.e., a conscious being – comes into existence, when the breath of life (or spirit) is added to a person’s physical body. In other words, when the breath of life *starts* animating a person’s body, that person *becomes* conscious.

Similarly, as soon as the breath of life *stops* animating a person’s physical body, the soul in question ceases to exist. In other words, when the breath of life *stops* animating a person’s body, that person *becomes* completely unconscious – i.e., the soul in question dies.

The reason why we know that souls can die is because Scripture *explicitly* states that fact:

**Ezekiel 18:4**

<sup>4</sup>Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

### **Ezekiel 18:20:**

<sup>20</sup>The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

### **James 5:19-20 (ESV):**

<sup>19</sup>My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, <sup>20</sup>let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

By definition, the word “immortal” means “not subject to death”. In other words, if something is immortal, then it can not die. Of course, the above verses explicitly tell us that souls can die. As a result, the above verses explicitly state that souls are not immortal – instead, souls are mortal!

### **Summary of body, spirit and soul**

To recap, here is a synopsis of what we have discussed: A physical body that *has* the breath of life (or spirit) in it is called a *soul* – i.e., a conscious being. A physical body that does *not* have the breath of life in it is called a *corpse* – i.e., an unconscious, dead body.

The above concepts can be displayed as a pair of “formulas”, as follows:

An unconscious, dead body + the breath of life = a conscious being (soul)

A conscious being (soul) - the breath of life = an unconscious, dead body

Note that the three items listed above – body, spirit, and soul – are *all* listed in the following verse:

### **1 Thessalonians 5:23:**

<sup>23</sup>And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit (energy) and soul (consciousness) and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Are dead people conscious of anything?**

As noted in the introduction, the mainstream doctrine states that people remain *conscious* after they die – by virtue of the fact that people have “immortal souls”. However, as listed above, Scripture states that souls are mortal – and that would indicate that people are not conscious after they die. So, let’s take an additional look in Scripture, to determine if people remain conscious after they die or not:

**Ecclesiastes 9:5**

<sup>5</sup>For the living know that they shall die: but **the dead know not any thing**, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

**Ecclesiastes 9:10:**

<sup>10</sup>Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

**Psalms 6:5:**

<sup>5</sup>For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

**Psalms 115:17:**

<sup>17</sup>The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.

**Psalms 146:2-4:**

<sup>2</sup>While I live will I praise the LORD: I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being.

<sup>3</sup>Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.

<sup>4</sup>His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day **his thoughts perish**.

**Isaiah 38:18-19:**

<sup>18</sup>For the grave cannot praise thee, death can not celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. <sup>19</sup>The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day: the father to the children shall make known thy truth.

All of the verses listed above indicate that dead people are **not** conscious **at all**. In other words, when people die, they become completely unconscious – i.e., dead people are not aware of anything.

**Death is described as “sleep”**

Another item to note is that Scripture frequently compares death to “sleep”. This gives us another indication that people are *not* conscious when they are dead. The following verses use that comparison:

**Psalms 13:3:**

<sup>3</sup>Consider and hear me, O LORD my God: lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;

**Acts 7:59-60 (ESV):**

<sup>59</sup>And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

**John 11:11-14 (ESV):**

<sup>11</sup>After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." <sup>12</sup>The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." <sup>13</sup>Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. <sup>14</sup>Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died," <sup>15</sup>and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

**Do people go to heaven after they die?**

Most denominations say that if a person believes in God, then that person will go to heaven when he dies. Basically, the mainstream doctrine states that when a believer dies, his immortal soul will leave his body and go to heaven – and as a result, that person will live in heaven, with God, forever. However, is that doctrine listed anywhere in Scripture?

Moses certainly believed in God – after all, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, He empowered Moses to part the Red Sea, etc. So, did Moses go to heaven, to be with God, when he died?

After Moses died, his assistant Joshua took over leadership of the Israelites. Let's see what God tells Joshua about Moses, when Joshua first takes over:

**Joshua 1:1-2 (ESV):**

<sup>1</sup>After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, <sup>2</sup>"Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.

Notice what God told Joshua: "Moses my servant is dead". This indicates that Moses is not still alive, in heaven! (If Moses *were* alive in heaven, then God would have said something like, "Moses my servant is up here with me, in heaven".) So, this tells me that Moses is dead and buried – *not* alive in heaven.

King David certainly believed in God – in fact, David is called "a man after God's own heart" in 1 Samuel 13. So, if the doctrine of "going to heaven after you die" is true, then King David must certainly have gone to heaven after he died. But did David actually go to heaven? Let's find out:

**Acts 2:29,34 (NIV):**

<sup>29</sup>"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.

<sup>34</sup>For David did not ascend to heaven

The above passage indicates that David did not go to heaven after he died! Instead, he is still dead and buried, in his tomb.

In fact, Jesus told us that **no one** has *ever* ascended into heaven, *except* Jesus himself:

**John 3:13 (ESV):**

<sup>13</sup> **No one** has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Scripture is pretty clear that people do **not** go to heaven after they die – instead, dead people remain “sleeping in the grave”, completely unconscious. In other words, when a person dies, he does not “go” *anywhere* – instead, he is simply a dead body, in the grave.

Scripture also states that humans and animals will **both** meet the **same** end – i.e., humans and animals *both* “return to dust”. For example, see these verses:

**Genesis 3:19 (ESV):**

<sup>19</sup>By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread,  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
for you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return."

**Ecclesiastes 3:19-20 (ESV):**

<sup>19</sup> For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

**Psalms 104:29 (ESV):**

<sup>29</sup>When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.

**After we die, will we ever come back to life?**

From the above three sections, we can see that when people die, they are no longer alive at all – that is, death is the complete absence of life. In addition, death is described as “sleep” – which implies that death may be a “temporary” state. Finally, we know that when people die, they do **not** go to heaven (or anywhere else). Instead, dead people are simply “sleeping in the grave”, completely unconscious.

So, now we reach the final question – after a person dies, is there *any way* that he can ever live again? If so, *how* can that person come back to life? Let’s see what Scripture has to say:

**Daniel 12:2 (YLT):**

<sup>2</sup>And the multitude of those sleeping in the dust of the ground do awake, some to life age-during, and some to reproaches -- to abhorrence age-during.

**Isaiah 26:19 (ESV):**

<sup>19</sup> Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.  
You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!  
For your dew is a dew of light,  
and the earth will give birth to the dead.

**Ezekiel 37:1-6:**

<sup>1</sup>The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,  
<sup>2</sup>And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.  
<sup>3</sup>And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.  
<sup>4</sup>Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.  
<sup>5</sup>Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:  
<sup>6</sup>And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD.

**John 5:28-29 (ESV):**

<sup>28</sup>Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice  
<sup>29</sup>and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

**John 6:40 (ESV):**

<sup>40</sup>For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

**Acts 24:15:**

<sup>15</sup>And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-16 (ESV):**

<sup>13</sup>But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. <sup>14</sup>For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup>For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup>For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.

All of the above verses indicate that our hope for life after death is resurrection. That is, Jesus will bring us back to life, *when* he returns. This is one of the primary reasons why Christians should look forward to

the *return of Jesus* – instead of looking forward to our deaths. (In Scripture, death is something to be dreaded – not something to look forward to!)

One final point to note is that *all* of the above verses indicate that the resurrection has not happened yet. In other words, the resurrection will occur in the *future* – when Jesus returns. The apostle Paul states that fact *explicitly*:

**2 Timothy 2:16-18 (NIV):**

<sup>16</sup> Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. <sup>17</sup> Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup> who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has **already taken place**, and they destroy the faith of some.

In other words, the belief that the resurrection has *already* taken place is not the truth!

## Conclusion

The following is a summary about what Scripture has to say about the soul – and about life after death:

1. People do not have souls – they are souls. A soul is a *conscious being*.
2. When the breath of life (or “spirit”) *starts* animating a person’s body, that person *becomes* conscious – i.e., he *becomes* a soul. When the breath of life *stops* animating a person’s body, that person becomes completely unconscious – i.e., his soul **dies**. As a result, the soul is **mortal** – it is not immortal.
3. Death is the complete absence of life. As a result, people who are dead are not conscious of anything – i.e. dead people are not “aware” of their surroundings at all. Death is also compared to “sleep”. In other words, people who are dead are simply “sleeping in the grave”, completely unconscious. Note: since dead people are completely unconscious, they are not able to experience any sort of “bliss” – or “torment”.
4. When Jesus returns, he will *resurrect* us. That is, Jesus will bring us back to life – so that we will live again, at that time. Until then, dead people will remain “in the grave”, awaiting resurrection.

In short, *when* Lord Jesus returns, he will *resurrect* us – so that we will live again! Hallelujah!