

Essay "B" on the Afterlife

Assorted New Testament References: Acts 7 And Stephen

This writer is fully persuaded because of what is written in the New Testament that at the time of death the deceased remain conscious, i.e., they are **not** in a state of soul-sleep. In this essay he will note one of the Biblical references that persuade him of this fact - that of Stephen of whom we read in Acts 6 and 7. In subsequent essays he shall note other references.

Stephen

As far as what is revealed, Stephen, one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6 to serve the tables of the Hellenist widows, was the first Christian martyr. After speaking what he spoke in Acts 7 it so aroused the anger of his listeners who were "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" that "they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him." This was right after Stephen, "being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'"¹

Although it is not stated as fact, I personally believe that when Stephen asked his accusers "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" and then told them that their "fathers" "killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" he knew that his minutes left on earth were few.

As he was being stoned and before he died he was able to utter two final statements. First, "as he was calling on God" he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and second, when "he knelt down" he "cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin'."

After he uttered these two final sentences the divine revelation of God says that "he fell asleep." Some persons, perhaps sincere but nevertheless misinformed, interpret this final statement concerning the events surrounding his death to mean that the real "him," his "spirit," his "inner man," went to sleep. But this is not what the inspired writ says.

¹ Acts 7:55-56
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It is important to note what the Scriptures say and what they do not say. Firstly, note what Stephen asked the Lord to "receive." He did not ask the Lord to "receive" his body; he asked the Lord to "receive" his "spirit." Secondly, the Scripture says that "he fell asleep"; the Scripture does not say that "his spirit fell asleep." This, of course, makes perfect sense since at death the "body" of men and the "spirit" of men part company.

This writer has reminded his readers many times in his writings to keep in mind what James 2:26 says - "...the body without the spirit is dead..." James 2:26 speaks of the "body" being dead - not the "spirit." One's "body" with his "spirit" is alive; he is a living soul. But when the body is separated from the "spirit," the "body" of man is "dead" and is metaphorically referred to being "asleep." While the "body" is "asleep" the "spirit" is alive and conscious.

But if it were true what the "soul-sleepers" say about all of this, Stephen committed to Jesus his sleeping "spirit." One cannot but wonder why or what interest Jesus would have in "sleeping spirits." The posture of Jesus in Acts 7:55, "standing at the right hand of God," suggests that He was anticipating and expecting to receive a conscious, living "spirit" rather than one that was sleeping.

Before Stephen spoke his request in Acts 7:59, there were two other persons in the Word of God who uttered a statement similar to that of Stephen before he died, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The first person was King David in Psalm 31:5 - "Into Your hand I commit my spirit." It should be noted that (1) he said this while conscious and (2) he continued to live and be conscious *after* he made the statement. In the context in which David made his statement, he obviously was placing the safety of his being into the care of his "LORD God."

The second person who uttered this same statement was King Jesus in Luke 23:46 when He was on the cross. It was the last thing that He said before He died - "'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.'" ² It is the statement of this second person upon which we need to focus as far as the purpose of this essay being written to demonstrate that when Stephen died his "spirit" did not enter a state of unconscious soul-sleeping.

² As most Bibles indicate, this statement was foreshadowed by King David's statement in Psalm 31:5 to which we just referred. Psalm 31:5 is one of those statements in the Bible that had a "double reference."

Jesus obviously committed His "spirit" to His Father upon His death. If we were to believe that what happened with Jesus' "spirit" was the same as what the misinformed soul-sleepers believe happened to Stephen's "spirit" we would have to conclude that Jesus' sleeping "spirit" was placed in the immediate care and presence of His Father in heaven. But the inspired Scriptures prohibit such an interpretation as this.

Acts 2:27, a one-line quote from Psalm 16³ says that Jesus went to Hades, the unseen abode of the dead, or as some prefer to call it, simply "the abode of the dead."⁴ Acts 2:31 further confirms this. There it is stated that Jesus' "soul was not left in Hades..." It should be obvious that Jesus' "soul" could not "not [be] left in Hades" without it being there in the first place. Therefore, upon His death, the "spirit" of Jesus went to Hades, not to the realm or in the presence of His heavenly Father. Are we to believe that when Jesus died His sleeping "spirit" went to Hades? Are we to believe that there was a time when Jesus, the Son of God, was in a state of unconsciousness?

There is another important point to consider from what is written in Acts 2:26. The Psalmist said in referring to his own death and prophetically that of Jesus', "...my flesh also will rest in hope." It was the "flesh," the body, of the Psalmist (and inferentially that of Jesus) that would "rest" and not his "spirit." If resting can be likened unto sleeping (and the body of man does "rest" when asleep) then, again, the Scriptures point out that it is the "body" of man and not the "spirit" of man that sleeps.

Considering all of this we are on the safest ground there is - Scriptural ground - to conclude that when Stephen died it was his "body" and not his "spirit" that was buried by the "devout men" in Acts 8:2 who "made great lamentation over him." The "spirit" of the righteous dead does not sleep in a coffin or in the "body" of the deceased that is subject to decay, dissolution, and corruption; they are placed as conscious beings into the immediate care of Jesus. That this place of "care" is in Hades rather than in heaven, until the resurrection of all bodies, is no "problem" for the Lord. As God His presence can be with the departed "spirit" of the righteous regardless of where that place is.

³ verse 10

⁴ John MacArthur, Jr., The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Acts 1 – 12, p. 66