

When We Die

The State of the Dead — Does the Soul Survive?

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Contents

- I. The Question Beneath the Rest
- II. Soul Sleep: The Watchtower's Teaching
- III. The Witness of the New Testament
- IV. "The Dead Know Nothing": Reading Ecclesiastes Rightly
- V. "The Soul That Sins Shall Die": A Question of Words
- VI. The Rich Man and Lazarus
- VII. Death as Sleep: A Metaphor, Not a Doctrine
- Behind the exegesis stands a philosophical assumption worth naming: that because thought is impaired when the brain is injured, and its expressions cease when the body dies, the soul must die with it. Peter Kreeft states what observation actually shows: "Observations of the body do not decide whether that body is an instrument of an independent spirit which continues to exist after its body-instrument dies, or whether the body is the cause of a dependent spirit which dies when its cause dies. Both hypotheses account for the observed facts."¹ The laboratory cannot settle the question; what settles it is the revelation the preceding sections have traced — and the revelation is not ambiguous.
- VIII. What the Catholic Church Teaches
- IX. Conclusion: The God of the Living
- Endnotes

I. The Question Beneath the Rest

Before a Christian can ask what awaits us in heaven, hell, or purgatory, a prior question must be answered, and almost everything depends on it: *what happens to us at the moment of death?* Does something of the person — what Scripture calls the soul — survive, conscious, to meet God before the resurrection of the body? Or does the whole person simply cease to exist, lapsing into nothingness until a future re-creation?

On this question the Catholic Church and the Watchtower divide at the root, and the division is the source of nearly every later disagreement about the last things. This page takes up that foundational question on its own. The three states that depend on it — heaven, hell, and purgatory — are treated on their own pages; here the concern is the premise beneath them all: whether the soul survives.²

II. Soul Sleep: The Watchtower's Teaching

The Watchtower teaches what theologians call *soul sleep*, or mortalism—though even “sleep” concedes too much, for on this teaching nothing remains to sleep. The person ceases to exist at death, and the resurrection is a re-creation: Jehovah, from His perfect memory of the individual's life pattern, makes the person anew. The human “soul” is not an immortal spirit distinct from the body, but simply the living person himself; and when the person dies, the soul dies. Nothing conscious remains. “When we die, we cease to exist,” the Society states plainly; “the dead can't think, act, or feel anything.” The dead are not anywhere — not in heaven, not in torment, not being purified — but simply nonexistent, awaiting a future resurrection in which God will re-create them from his memory of who they were.³

It is essential to see how much rests on this single claim, for the Watchtower's whole map of the afterlife is built upon it. If no one is conscious between death and resurrection, then there is no one in heaven now, no one in hell, no one in purgatory; the traditional Christian picture must be redrawn from the ground up. So everything turns on whether the claim is true. And the New Testament, read plainly, says it is not.

III. The Witness of the New Testament

Again and again, the New Testament presents the faithful dead as consciously alive with God *before* the resurrection of the body. To the criminal crucified beside him, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43) — today, not after some distant re-creation. Paul desires “to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23), and is confident that to be “away from the body” is to be “at home with the

Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Neither hope makes any sense if death is simple unconsciousness; one does not long to depart in order to feel and know nothing.⁴

The vision of Revelation is more vivid still: John sees “under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God,” fully conscious, crying out “How long?” and being answered and comforted (Rev. 6:9–11). At the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah — dead for centuries — appear alive and in conversation with Christ (Matt. 17:3). And Jesus settles the underlying principle in a single stroke, against the Sadducees who denied any life beyond the grave: God “is not God of the dead, but of the living,” for he still calls himself, long after their deaths, “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Matt. 22:32). The patriarchs, then, live to God. The cumulative force of these texts is hard to evade: the dead in Christ are not nothing; they are with him.

Nor do the rehearsed replies help. To call the souls under the altar a figure, like Abel’s blood crying from the ground, concedes what it resists: this figure speaks, is answered, is given white robes, and is told to rest a little longer—nobody comforts a metaphor. Paul’s statement that God “alone has immortality” (1 Tim. 6:16) teaches no soul-sleep: He alone has it of Himself, underived, while the creature holds unending life on loan from the Giver. And the question “why a resurrection, if the dead are with Christ already?” answers itself: because a soul is not the whole man. The blessed dead are with Christ and still await “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23); the resurrection is not redundant but the completion of a person death left incomplete.

And the Watchtower’s own account of resurrection sharpens the problem into a contradiction. Since on its teaching nothing survives death, the resurrection cannot restore a man; it must re-create him—Jehovah, remembering the individual’s life pattern perfectly, making a new man who possesses the old man’s memories. But press on that word memories. A man newly created, who remembers being Lazarus, is not Lazarus; he is a copy who believes he is. The proof is that a perfect memory can be copied twice. If Jehovah could make one man with Lazarus’s life pattern, He could make two—and the two could not both be the man who died, each remembering the same deathbed. What remembering cannot guarantee, remembering cannot be: identity requires that something of the man himself persist from the deathbed to the resurrection morning, and that persisting something is precisely what the Church calls the soul. The alternative is grim beyond the arguing: if nothing persists, then no one who has died will ever live again—not one martyr, not one faithful witness. Each will simply be replaced, by a stranger wearing his memories, while the man himself stays exactly as extinct as the Watchtower says he became. The promise to the thief would then have been made to a man who could never hear it kept. Christ promised Paradise to him—and only a soul that survives can be the same him who arrives.

IV. “The Dead Know Nothing”: Reading Ecclesiastes Rightly

The Witness case rests above all on a handful of Old Testament texts, chiefly Ecclesiastes 9:5 — “the dead know nothing at all” — and Psalm 146:4, “his thoughts perish.” Taken as bare proof-texts, these seem to settle the matter. Read in context, they do not bear the weight placed on them.

Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature, and its great refrain is life “under the sun,” the world as it appears to unaided human observation. From that vantage the dead truly “know nothing” of what passes here: “never again will they have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Eccl. 9:6). The Preacher is describing the *appearance* of death to the living, and the limits of earthly wisdom, not delivering a finished revelation of the world to come — which is why, in the very next breath, he counsels simply to eat your bread and enjoy your toil (Eccl. 9:7–10). To take a proverb about the boundaries of what the living can see, and wield it to cancel the explicit teaching of Christ and the apostles on the conscious life of the soul, is to let the dim light put out the bright one. Revelation is progressive: the New Testament does not retract Ecclesiastes; it surpasses it, as the dawn surpasses the first gray light.⁵

The two companion proof texts fare the same way in context. Psalm 146:4 — “his thoughts perish” — sits in a psalm whose subject is the folly of trusting in mortal princes rather than in God: the point is that a great man’s plans die with him, not that no one survives death. And “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19) is spoken of the body, which no Christian disputes; the Church has never claimed the body is exempt from the grave. Neither text says what the argument needs it to say.

V. “The Soul That Sins Shall Die”: A Question of Words

A second strand of the Witness argument is verbal. The Hebrew word for “soul,” *nephesh* (and its Greek counterpart *psychē*), often means simply a living creature or the person himself; and in that sense Scripture can speak of a “soul” dying — “the soul that sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). Therefore, the argument runs, the soul is mortal, and death is its end.

The Catholic happily grants the premise and denies the conclusion. It is quite true that “soul” in Scripture often means “person” or “life,” and that the biblical vocabulary for the inner life is rich and supple rather than technical. But a single sense of a word cannot decide a doctrine. That “soul” sometimes means “the living person” no more proves that nothing survives death than the phrase “the town was dead at night” proves that towns can perish. The real question is not lexical but factual: *is the human person, once dead, conscious before the resurrection?* And that is answered not by counting the senses of *nephesh*, but by the texts in which the dead are shown awake and aware before God — Lazarus comforted, the martyrs crying out, the thief in Paradise.⁶

Ezekiel's own context points the same way. The chapter's subject is individual moral responsibility — the son shall not bear the guilt of the father — and “the soul that sins shall die” assigns each person the consequences of his own sin. It is a sentence about who answers for what, not about what survives death.

VI. The Rich Man and Lazarus

No passage presses the point harder than Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Both men die; and immediately, without any wait for a distant resurrection, both are conscious — Lazarus “carried by the angels” to comfort, the rich man “in anguish,” each aware, each remembering his earthly life, even conversing across the divide. This is precisely the picture soul-sleep forbids.

The Watchtower's only escape is to call the account “merely a parable,” as though that drained it of force. But it does not. Even if it is a parable, Jesus draws his parables from the way things really are (sowers and seed, fathers and sons, kings and servants) not from impossibilities; he does not teach truth by painting a picture he believes to be false. A teacher who held that the dead are unconscious would not frame a story on the assumption that they are vividly awake. The framework Jesus assumes — the dead conscious, aware, and at rest or in anguish *at once* upon death — is exactly the framework the Watchtower denies, and it fits seamlessly with his promise to the thief: “today you will be with me in Paradise.”⁷

VII. Death as Sleep: A Metaphor, Not a Doctrine

The Witness will answer that Scripture itself calls death a “sleep” — Jesus says “our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” (John 11:11); Stephen “fell asleep” in death (Acts 7:60); Paul speaks of those who “have fallen asleep” (1 Thess. 4:13). Does this not prove the dead are unconscious, as a sleeper is?

It does not, for “sleep” here is a gentle and natural metaphor, not a technical claim about the soul. It pictures two true things: the stillness of the dead body, which lies as if asleep, and the hope of awakening in the resurrection, from which the dead will rise as a sleeper rises. That is why the image is so tender and so common. But the metaphor describes death as it appears *to us*, looking on the body; it says nothing against the soul's waking life with God. And the proof that it cannot mean unconsciousness is that the same Jesus who called Lazarus' death a “sleep” told the dying thief he would be in Paradise *that day*, and taught that God is the God “of the living.” A single author does not contradict himself; what sleeps is the body, awaiting the resurrection that will raise it, while the person neither ceases nor sleeps in the meantime.⁸

VIII. What the Catholic Church Teaches

The Catholic teaching can now be stated simply, and it is important to see what it does *not* claim. It does not adopt the pagan Greek idea of a soul that is divine, self-existent, and trapped in an evil body it is glad to escape. The body is good, its death is a real evil and an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), and the resurrection of the body — not the mere survival of the soul — remains the Christian hope. Until that resurrection the person is, in a real sense, *incomplete*.

What the Church teaches is that God creates each human soul immortal: a spiritual principle that does not perish when the body dies, but subsists, conscious, and so can meet God at death and await the day when it will be reunited with a glorified body. This is why the Church can affirm, with the Witnesses, the resurrection of the body as the Christian hope — and affirm, against them, that the dead in Christ are even now alive to him. The two are not rivals: the soul lives in the interim; the whole person is restored at the end. “He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”⁹

IX. Conclusion: The God of the Living

The question of this page is the quiet hinge on which the rest of the afterlife turns. If the soul does not survive death, then the Watchtower is right to rebuild everything — to empty heaven of its saints, to replace hell with annihilation, to deny purgatory altogether. But the soul *does* survive, and the New Testament says so too plainly to be set aside: the thief is in Paradise that day, Paul departs to be with Christ, the martyrs cry out beneath the altar, the patriarchs live to God. Against this, a proverb from Ecclesiastes about the limits of earthly sight, a flexible word for “soul,” and a tender metaphor of sleep cannot prevail.

And so the foundation holds, and the three states can be built upon it: the blessed with Christ, the lost in self-chosen loss, the imperfect made ready to see God. But the deepest answer to the fear of death is not a doctrine of the soul at all; it is a Person. “God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him” (Luke 20:38). To die in Christ is not to fall into nothing, but to fall into the hands of the living God — and to be, as Jesus promised, with him.

Endnotes

1. Peter Kreeft, “The Case for Life After Death,” quoted exactly from the text published at peterkreeft.com and checked against the copy in the site’s reference library. The essay’s fuller argument — from the near-universal testimony of mankind, from the immateriality of mind, and from the resurrection of Christ — repays reading whole.

2. This question is foundational for everything the two sides say about the afterlife. The Watchtower’s distinctive positions on heaven (a limited heavenly class), hell (annihilation rather than conscious loss), and purgatory (rejected outright) all *follow* from soul-sleep: if no one is conscious between death and resurrection, there is no one in heaven now, no one in conscious punishment, and no one being purified. Establish the conscious survival of the soul, and the three states fall into place; deny it, and the whole afterlife must be rebuilt. These three topics are treated on their own pages; this one treats the premise beneath them all.

3. The Watchtower teaches “soul sleep” (mortalism): the soul is not immortal, and at death the whole person ceases to exist until a future resurrection. “When we die, we cease to exist ... The dead can’t think, act, or feel anything” (“What Happens When You Die?”, jw.org). The argument rests chiefly on Ecclesiastes 9:5 (“the dead know nothing at all”) and Psalm 146:4 (“his thoughts perish”), together with the claim that “soul” (*nephesh*) simply means the person, who dies (Ezek. 18:4). On this view there is no conscious intermediate state of any kind — no one in heaven, hell, or purgatory now.

4. Against soul-sleep, the New Testament repeatedly presents the faithful dead as consciously alive with God before the resurrection: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43; see the separate study on the New World Translation’s relocation of the comma here); “I desire to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23); “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8); the souls of the martyrs “under the altar” who cry out and are told to “rest a little longer” (Rev. 6:9–11). At the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear alive and conversing (Matt. 17:3), and Jesus argues that God “is not God of the dead, but of the living,” since he calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 22:32).

5. Ecclesiastes is Wisdom literature describing life and death “under the sun” — from the vantage of unaided human observation, in which the dead indeed do nothing visible and are cut off from the activities of this world (Eccl. 9:6, 10). It is not a developed revelation of the afterlife; the same book counsels eating, drinking, and enjoying toil precisely because more was not yet known (Eccl. 9:7–10). To build a doctrine that overturns the explicit New Testament texts on the conscious survival of the soul, on the strength of a

proverb about the limits of earthly observation, is to read the lower light as cancelling the higher.

6. Much of the Watchtower's case is verbal. It is true that the Hebrew *nephesh* and the Greek *psychē* often mean simply "living creature" or "person," and that in such uses a "soul" can be said to die (Ezek. 18:4). The Catholic does not dispute this; Scripture's vocabulary for the inner life is rich and flexible. But a single sense of a word cannot settle a doctrine. The question is not whether *nephesh* ever means "person," but whether the human person, once dead, is conscious before the resurrection — and that is answered not by lexicography but by the texts in which the dead are shown alive to God (Luke 16:19–31; 23:43; Rev. 6:9–11).

7. The Watchtower dismisses Luke 16:19–31 (the rich man and Lazarus) as "merely a parable" and so not evidence of conscious survival. But even if it is a parable, Jesus' parables draw on real states of affairs, not impossibilities, to teach truth; he does not illustrate spiritual realities with scenarios he regards as false. The detail that the dead are immediately conscious — Lazarus comforted, the rich man in torment, both aware and remembering — is precisely the framework Jesus assumes and his hearers accepted. It coheres with the rest of his teaching (Luke 23:43; Matt. 22:32) and tells decisively against soul-sleep.

8. Scripture's frequent description of death as "sleep" (e.g., John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Thess. 4:13) is a gentle metaphor for the body's stillness and for the hope of awakening in the resurrection, not a technical claim that the soul is unconscious. The same Jesus who called Lazarus' death a "sleep" told the dying thief he would be in Paradise that very day, and taught that God is God "of the living." The metaphor describes how death looks to us; it does not overturn what revelation says of the soul's waking life with God.

9. The Catholic teaching is not the pagan Greek notion of a soul that is divine and self-existent, but that God creates each spiritual soul immortal, and it does not perish with the body, awaiting reunion with it at the resurrection. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§362–368, 1022. The body truly dies; the person is incomplete until the resurrection of the body (1 Cor. 15); but the soul subsists and is conscious. So Catholics affirm both what the Witnesses rightly stress — the resurrection of the body as the Christian hope — and what they wrongly deny: the soul's survival in the meantime.

For Further Reading

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§362–368, 988–1022 (the soul, death, the resurrection). Free online at <https://usc.cb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

The Soul and the Afterlife, Catholic Answers. Free online at <https://www.catholic.com/tract/are-we-body-and-soul-or-just-body>.

The Case for Life After Death, by Peter Kreeft—the philosophical case, free at his site.

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“He is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.” — Luke 20:38

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.