



WHERE ARE THE DEAD?

Course 6, *New World Coming*, Lesson 10

The Problem: Jesus lived a life of tireless compassion and self-giving love. Without a permanent home or the consistent comfort of family, He walked the dusty roads of Palestine, bringing healing to the broken and hope to the hopeless. Yet amid the strain of public ministry and constant opposition, there was one home that offered Him peace—a quiet refuge in Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus welcomed Him with warmth and devotion. Scripture tells us, simply and beautifully, *“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus”* John 11:5. But even in that haven, sorrow eventually came. Lazarus fell gravely ill, and Mary and Martha urgently sent word to Jesus: *“Lord, the one You love is sick”* John 11:3. They expected He would come at once. But strangely, Jesus delayed—and Lazarus died.

Two days later, Jesus told His disciples, *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to wake him.”* They misunderstood. They thought He meant natural rest. So He clarified, plainly: *“Lazarus is dead”* John 11:14. When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb four days. Mourning filled the air. Yet in that moment of despair, Jesus made a stunning promise to Martha: *“Your brother will rise again.”* She replied, *“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”* Jesus said to her, *“I am the resurrection and the life.”* At the tomb, He called out with divine authority: *“Lazarus, come out!”* And the dead man—bound in grave wrappings—came back to life. See John 11:1–44.

This powerful story raises one of life’s most profound questions: What happens when we die?

- Was Lazarus conscious during those four days—or asleep, just as Jesus said?
- Did his “soul” go somewhere else, or was he unaware of time passing?
- Can the dead see us? Hear us? Speak to us?
- Do our loved ones live on in another realm?
- And ultimately—what does the Bible really teach about the condition of the dead?

What You May Not Have Heard in Church: Many religious traditions, deeply influenced by ancient Greek philosophy, teach the immortality of the soul—that death is merely the separation of the body and soul, and that the soul immediately continues in heaven or hell. But is this what the Bible teaches, or has something been lost in translation? The early Church was not untouched by the philosophies of Plato or the teachings of Hellenistic Judaism. Thinkers like Philo of Alexandria and later theologians such as Origen incorporated these views into Christian thought. But today, in a time of global confusion about death, we need to return to the Scriptures—God’s living Word—for clear answers.

Objectives: In this lesson we will explore--

- I. Why Scripture describes death as “sleep”—and what that metaphor reveals.
- II. What is the “spirit” in man? Where does it go at death?
- III. What is a soul—and is it inherently immortal?
- IV. Do the dead have any awareness or consciousness?
- V. Where are the dead now?
- VI. What does the Bible teach about the resurrection—and when it will happen?

This study will challenge assumptions, affirm God’s loving justice, and offer solid hope grounded not in tradition, but in truth. Come with your questions. The Bible has answers—and they’re better than you may have imagined.

I. DEATH AS SLEEP

In both Old and New Testaments, death is represented as a sleep. As sleep is a state of unconsciousness, so is death.

The Word:

1. What was said of Moses when he died? How is death described in this passage? Deuteronomy 31:16
2. How did Job understand the experience of death? What did he believe happens after a person dies? Job 7:21; 14:10-12
3. What insight did Daniel receive about the dead? How many are said to sleep—and what awaits them? Daniel 12:2
4. What was the condition of the saints raised at Christ's resurrection? Where had they been until that moment? Matthew 27:52
5. How did Jesus describe the state of the dead? What metaphor did He consistently use? Mark 5:39; John 11:11
6. What occurred when Stephen died? What does the language here suggest about his awareness? Acts 7:60

Explanation: Throughout Scripture, the dead are consistently described as being in a state of *sleep*—a peaceful, unconscious rest. Nowhere do Bible writers suggest that a person becomes a disembodied, conscious spirit at death, while the body remains behind. On the contrary, their consistent testimony points to death as a complete cessation of conscious existence, with hope resting in the resurrection. When Bible writers faced death, their expectation was not immediate entrance into heaven or any conscious afterlife—it was to remain asleep in the grave until, by a miracle of God, they were raised to life again.

Relevance: Even at this early stage in our study, it becomes clear that the popular doctrine of the immortality of the soul warrants serious re-examination. While this belief is deeply embedded in many religious traditions, it's noticeably absent from the consistent teaching of Scripture. But impressions alone are not enough. We must go deeper—searching the Word of God to test all things and hold fast to what is true.

II. WHAT IS THE "SPIRIT" IN MAN AND WHERE DOES IT GO AT DEATH?

Many believe that within each person resides an immortal, immaterial spirit that remains conscious after death—departing to either heaven or hell. But is this what the Bible really teaches?

The Word:

7. What were the component parts of man given by God at creation? Genesis 2:7
8. What happens to these components when a man dies? Psalm 146:3-4; Ecclesiastes 12:7
9. What gift from God do animals share with man? Genesis 7:15, 21-22
10. What difference is there between the breath of life given to man and that given to animals? Do they go to different places when they die? Ecclesiastes 3:19-21
11. What aspects of personality are sometimes referred to as man's "spirit"? Job 20:3; Matthew 26:41; Romans 1:9; 1 Corinthians 2:11

Explanation: "God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). This verse does not describe God inserting an immortal soul into an earthly body. Instead, it portrays the union of body and breath—dust and the divine life-giving power—as the formula for a living being. The "breath of life" (Hebrew: *neshamah*) or "spirit" (Hebrew: *ruach*, Greek: *pneuma*) represents the vital life force granted by God, not a conscious or immortal entity.

At death, this process is reversed:

- The body returns to the dust (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7).
- The breath of life returns to God who gave it (Psalm 146:4; Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The Bible never portrays the "spirit" as an independently conscious, immortal soul surviving apart from the body. Instead, it is simply the life-giving energy that all living creatures share—human and animal alike (Ecclesiastes 3:19–21).

What Does "*Spirit*" (*Ruach*) Really Mean? *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* outlines the range of meanings for *ruach*:

1. Breath or air (Psalm 33:6)
2. Wind or breeze (Exodus 14:21)
3. The animating principle of life (Genesis 6:17; 7:15)
4. Seat of thought, emotion, and will (Genesis 41:8; Deuteronomy 34:9)

None of these uses suggest that *ruach* refers to a disembodied, conscious soul continuing after death.

What about Ecclesiastes 12:7? Some argue that this verse proves the immortal soul goes to heaven at death. But that interpretation overreaches the text. If the "spirit" here were a conscious, moral being, then both the righteous and the wicked would return to God in the same way—something Scripture does not support. Instead, the verse simply reaffirms the reversal of creation: the body decays, and the life force—given by God—is reclaimed by Him.

The "Spirit" as the Seat of Intellect and Emotion: While *ruach* and *pneuma* are sometimes used to describe mental or emotional functions—such as understanding (Daniel 5:12), willingness (Matthew 26:41), or inner motivation (Romans 1:9)—these are always functions of the living person. Nowhere does Scripture suggest that these capacities remain active apart from the body. At death, these faculties cease entirely, as the person becomes unconscious (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). The "spirit" in biblical usage is not the immortal "real self" that escapes the body at death. It is rather the inner vitality—the breath and spark of life—that is wholly dependent on a living, functioning body. When that life force is withdrawn, the person ceases to exist as a conscious being.

Relevance: This study challenges the widely accepted doctrine of the immortal soul—a belief heavily shaped by Greek philosophy rather than Scripture. We've seen that the Bible teaches a far different picture: death is a sleep, not a migration to another realm of conscious existence.

This leads us to a deeper question:

III. WHAT IS A "SOUL"? IS IT IMMORTAL?

Did God create within man an immortal, indestructible soul? Genesis 2:7 tells us: Body + Breath of Life = "*A Living Soul*." This formula implies the soul is not a separate entity, but the whole person. Remove the breath, and the person becomes a dead soul. If souls can die, they cannot be immortal—because immortality means the inability to die. So what does the rest of the Bible say? Let's explore.

The Word:

12. Can a living soul die? What do the texts say? Ezekiel 18:14; Revelation 16:3; Numbers 6:6. 7.2
13. What did Jesus teach about God's plan to destroy the souls of wicked people? Matthew 10:28
14. What term is used for the animals? Genesis 1:20-21, 24, 30; 2:19; 9:10
15. Comparing man with God, who only has immortality? 1 Timothy 6:15-16

Explanation: Are souls Immortal? Scripture consistently affirms that the soul is not inherently immortal. According to Genesis 2:7, when God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, "*man*

became a living soul." He did not receive a soul—he became one. A living soul is the result of body + breath. When the breath of life is withdrawn at death, the person ceases to be a living soul. They are no longer a conscious being—they are now a dead soul.

This understanding leads to a crucial point:

If the soul can die, it cannot be immortal.

And if the wicked are ultimately destroyed in hell, as Jesus taught (Matthew 10:28), they do not suffer eternally—they perish.

The teaching of eternal suffering depends on the assumption that souls are immortal. But the Bible refutes that idea. Only God *"has immortality"* (1 Timothy 6:16). Human souls are not inherently indestructible. Therefore, the traditional concept of a soul burning forever in hell rests on a theological foundation that Scripture simply does not support.

What Does the Bible Mean by "Soul"? The Hebrew word translated "soul" is *nephesh*, and its Greek counterpart in the New Testament is *psuchē*. Both words are more accurately translated as "life" or "person"—not as an immaterial, conscious entity that exists apart from the body. In the King James Version, *nephesh* is sometimes translated as "creature," such as in Genesis 1:20–21, 24, and 2:19—passages that describe animals as living souls, just as humans are. Animals, like humans, were formed from the dust and received the breath of life. When they die, they too cease to be living souls.

The respected Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Kittel) affirms that *nephesh* denotes the whole, living person, not a separable soul-entity. It can refer to an individual (Genesis 12:5), and at times is best understood simply as "life" or "self." Similarly, in the New Testament, *psuchē* is used to describe the human life or person as a whole (e.g., Mark 3:4; 8:35). Nowhere does the Bible depict the soul as immortal by nature or existing in a conscious, disembodied state after death.

Relevance: The Bible never presents the soul as a separate, immortal being that continues to live in heaven or hell after death. The word "soul" may refer to the person, the inner life, or faculties like emotion and intellect—but always within the context of a living being. When the body dies, these faculties cease. Consciousness ends. What is preserved, however, is the believer's identity and faithfulness, safely held in God's memory—with the promise of resurrection at Christ's return. Eternal life is not the natural possession of the soul. It is the gift of God, given to the faithful at the resurrection (Romans 6:23; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17).

This is a doctrine not of despair, but of hope—one that points us to a God who remembers, who restores, and who gives life everlasting, not through philosophical tradition, but through the power of the risen Christ.

IV. DO THE DEAD HAVE CONSCIOUSNESS OF ANY KIND?

The Bible's answer is so clear and straightforward that it's surprising this question has caused so much confusion.

The Word:

16. According to the wise man, how much awareness do the dead possess? Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, 10

17. Are the dead aware of what happens to their loved ones? Job 14:21

18. Do the dead retain knowledge of God or offer Him praise? Psalm 6:5; 115:17

Explanation: Scripture consistently teaches that the dead are unconscious—unaware of their surroundings, incapable of thought or feeling. They do not ascend to heaven or descend to hell to live on in some disembodied, conscious state. Rather, they return to the dust, their life principle withdrawn (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The Bible calls this state "sleep", indicating complete rest, silence, and lack of awareness. The psalmist is unambiguous: *"The dead do not praise the Lord"*

Psalm 115:17. If the righteous were already in heaven, surely they would be praising God. But Scripture says otherwise—because they are not yet raised.

What About the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus? (*Luke 16:19–31*)

This parable is often cited as evidence for consciousness after death, but a careful reading shows it was never intended as a literal description of the afterlife. Instead, it was a parable—a familiar rabbinic teaching device—meant to rebuke the self-righteous religious elite and underscore the urgency of responding to God’s Word now, rather than waiting for miraculous signs.

Key indicators that this is figurative:

- Lazarus is said to rest in “Abraham’s bosom”—clearly a symbol, not a physical location.
- The rich man and Lazarus have physical bodies (fingers, tongue), despite the common teaching that souls are bodiless.
- They converse across a literal chasm between heaven and hell—something no one believes to be physically possible.
- The rich man asks Lazarus to return to the living—which Jesus frames as impossible unless someone is *raised from the dead* (v. 31)—suggesting the true message of the story.

This imagery was familiar in the first century. In fact, Josephus, the Jewish historian, recounts a similar tale in his writings, further showing that Jesus was using a known cultural illustration—not delivering a doctrinal treatise on the soul. [See *An Extract out of Josephus's Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades*, in *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston, Kregel, 1960, pp. 637–638.]

Relevance The Bible’s teaching about the unconscious state of the dead offers profound peace. It frees us from centuries of fear-based teachings about eternal torment, purgatory, or restless souls. We are urged to live righteously—not out of fear of immediate judgment after death—but in loving response to the grace of Jesus Christ. Scripture never describes hell as a place where the wicked suffer in conscious agony forever. Instead, it says plainly: “*The dead know not anything*” Ecclesiastes 9:5. Death, for the believer, is not something to dread—it is a temporary sleep, a waiting place until the voice of Christ calls His own back to life.

V. WHERE ARE THE DEAD NOW?

The Bible doesn’t leave us guessing. It clearly teaches not only where the dead are, but also where they are not.

The Word:

19. Where did David *not* go when he died, even though he was forgiven and faithful? Acts 2:34

20. According to Isaiah, where are the dead awaiting restoration? Isaiah 26:19

21. What place did Job expect to wait for the transformation only God can bring? Job 14:14; 17:131

Explanation In his powerful sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter clarified that David’s words in Psalm 16 were prophetic—not self-referential. When David said, “*You will not leave my soul in hell, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption,*” (Psalm 16:10), Peter explained that David had died, was buried, and had not ascended to heaven (Acts 2:29, 34). That promise referred to Jesus, the Messiah, who rose from the grave before His body saw decay (Acts 2:27–31). Peter’s statement is striking: “*David is not ascended into the heavens.*” Here was a righteous man, described as one after God’s own heart, whose sins had been forgiven. Yet he remained in the grave.

And David was not alone. The Bible consistently teaches that the dead—whether righteous or not—do not go to heaven or hell immediately upon death. Instead, they rest in the grave, unconscious, awaiting the resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; Job 14:14). Like Job, they wait in the dust of the earth, trusting that God will call them forth when the time is right.

This echoes a broader theme throughout Scripture: the dead are not watching us from afar, nor suffering endlessly. They are at rest.

Relevance: This truth offers comfort, clarity, and hope. If our loved ones were in heaven, watching our pain and sorrow unfold, how could they truly be happy? And if the wicked were suffering in hell immediately after death, waiting through untold centuries until final judgment, how could that possibly reflect the justice—or mercy—of a loving God? But Scripture presents something far more compassionate: Death is sleep. It is rest. It is silence. There is no suffering, no watching, no weeping. The dead await the voice of the Life-giver, who will one day call them by name. And when He does—oh, what a morning it will be.

VI. WHAT BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT THE RESURRECTION AND WHEN IT WILL HAPPEN

The ancient Sadducees denied it. Jesus and the apostles taught it.

The Word:

- 22. What did Jesus teach about the resurrection? John 5:28-29
- 23. What did the Apostle Paul teach concerning the resurrection? 1 Corinthians 15:16-22; 2 Corinthians 4:14
- 24. When do believers in Christ become immortal? 1 Corinthians 15:51-54
- 25. When do the faithful receive their rewards? Luke 14:13-14; (compare 1 Peter 5:4; 2 Timothy 4:7-8)
- 26. Are the dead raised in bodily form or in spirit form? Philippians 3:20-21; Romans 8:11, 23

Explanation: The Resurrection and the Promise of Immortality.

Jesus plainly taught that there will be two resurrections—one for the righteous and one for the unrighteous. Scripture makes it equally clear that the resurrection of the righteous takes place at His second coming. At that moment, those who died in faith will be raised from the grave and granted immortality (1 Thessalonians 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:52–53).

But if the dead are already alive in heaven as conscious, immortal souls, why would a resurrection be necessary at all? Why reattach a disembodied soul to a body, only to restore what was never lost? The Bible teaches no such idea. Its testimony is beautifully consistent: the dead sleep—completely unconscious—until they are raised by the voice of Christ at His return (John 5:28–29).

In that great moment, the faithful living will also be transformed, receiving immortality and joining the resurrected in the air to meet the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The saints are not raised as spirits—but as whole, glorified beings, healed of every blemish and restored in both mind and body (Philippians 3:20–21). Together, they are welcomed into the everlasting joy of heaven. This is the great hope of the gospel: the sleep of death is not the end—it is a pause before a divine awakening.

And oh, what an awakening it will be! Families long separated will be reunited: parents with children, spouses with loved ones, friends with kindred souls. No more sorrow. No more pain. No more death. Just as Revelation 21:4 promises, “God will wipe away every tear,” and the former things will be gone forever.

Relevance: Where Will You Stand on That Day? Jesus is not only the One who conquered death—He is “*the resurrection and the life*” (John 11:25). Just as He called Lazarus from the tomb, He will raise all who belong to Him in the last day. When the trumpet of God sounds and the graves give up their faithful sleepers, that day will be one of glory and indescribable joy.

But here's the question: Will you be among them? This is not a moment to postpone. Now is the time to make your calling and election sure—by surrendering your life to the One who gave His for you. If you allow Him to awaken your heart today, to raise you from spiritual death into newness of life, you can have full assurance that when the clouds part, you will rise to meet Him with joy.

“For I am persuaded,” wrote Paul, “that neither death, nor life... shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). So why not give Him your heart now? He already gave you His.

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The "spirit" in man is immortal.
 - b. The righteous dead are in heaven now.
 - c. Only God has immortality.
 - d. The dead are asleep in their graves.
2. Discuss: If the dead are unconscious and not living in heaven or hell, then the appearances claimed by spiritualists cannot actually be the spirits of deceased people. So who—or what—are these “spirits” that seem to communicate with the living?

Further Reflection: Who Are the Spirits That Appear to the Living? If the dead are unconscious—resting in the grave, unable to think, feel, or communicate—then any spirit claiming to be a deceased loved one cannot be who it appears to be. The Bible warns that Satan and his angels can disguise themselves to deceive (2 Corinthians 11:14–15). These manifestations are not harmless illusions—they are demonic impersonations designed to lead people away from the truth of God’s Word.

Key Scriptures to Explore:

- Ecclesiastes 9:5–6, 10 – The dead know nothing; they have no part in anything under the sun.
- Job 14:21 – The dead are unaware of what happens to their families.
- Isaiah 8:19–20 – A direct warning against consulting the dead: *“Should not a people seek their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?”*
- 2 Corinthians 11:14–15 – Satan masquerades as an angel of light; his servants do the same.
- Revelation 16:13–14 – Evil spirits working miracles go out to deceive the world.
- 1 Samuel 28 – The story of Saul and the medium of Endor shows that even apparent “resurrections” can be demonic deceptions.

The Bible is clear: the dead do not return to speak with the living. Any such appearance is a counterfeit—part of Satan’s end-time strategy to deceive. That’s why God calls us to test every spirit (1 John 4:1) and to cling to the Word as our safeguard.