

The fall festival season is an exciting time. In it we find four specific holy days, each depicting a specific point or event in God's plan of salvation. With each holy day, we find a certain amount of tradition – most based on Jewish understanding of the festivals. One of those traditions is that the 6th month of the Jewish 'religious' calendar (the month of Elul) is to be a time of repentance. Why? Because after Elul comes the Feast of Trumpets, which in Jewish understanding begins the time of judgment for God's people. This period of repentance is illustrated in Matthew's account of the events surrounding Yeshua's baptism.

^{ESV} **Matthew 3:5-7** Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The "wrath to come" is what the prophets call "the birthpains of the Messiah" ¹ and is known in Christianity as the "Tribulation". In Jewish eschatology, this time of judgment begins on Yom Teruah (Feast of Trumpets) and continues through Yom Kippur.

The idea of a time of judgment or a 'judgment day' is shared by both Judaism and Christianity, and in most cases, judgment is followed by either a curse or a reward. But there is another shared belief that throws a wrench in that concept and that is the belief that when a person dies, his consciousness continues in another place. For Christians, that place is either Heaven or Hell, and for Judaism, it's either Sheol or Paradise.

It is not uncommon to hear a person, especially a Christian, say about a deceased person that he or she "is with God and Jesus" or that he "is in a better place". But is that really true? And if it is, why are people not "dying to get there"? If a good person goes to heaven when he dies, why are we so afraid of death? And think about this – if a person at death goes directly to heaven, did Elisha do the Shunammite woman a disservice when he healed her son? ²; and did Yeshua – when He brought His friend Lazarus back from the utopia of heaven to face many more years of trial on earth – cause him more harm than good? ³

If upon death, a 'good' person goes directly to heaven, what then is the purpose of the Judgment? These and other questions would need to be answered if a person really believes that his life continues on in some way when he dies.

So what happens when a person dies? Unfortunately, there is no way to scientifically determine that because science is unable to bring a person back from that state. Because we believe that the Bible teaches that the dead will live again, we have to then glean from the scriptures what happens to those who are dead. Therefore, this study will show what the Bible has to say about this topic. Keep in mind that this is not a "salvation issue" nor should it affect a person's walk in this life, but with this information I hope we can be encouraged as we face the trials ahead.

The Big Lie!

To begin our study, let's go to the beginning – the book of Genesis. It is there that we find the first recorded lie, the lie that the adversary told Eve. We'll break into the story as God is giving instructions to Adam.

¹(ESV) Jeremiah 4:25-31, 48:41, 49:22; Micah 5:2-4; Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8

² 2 Kings 4:20-37

³ John 11:1-45



^{ESV} **Genesis 2:15-17** The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

This seems simple enough – you can eat from every tree but one; and if you eat from that one, you will die. But haSatan has a plan. He twists the truth in order to deceive Eve. Picking up the story –

^{ESV} **Genesis 3:1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" ² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Though Eve was simply a part of Adam's body when God gave him instructions concerning the trees, Adam apparently passed those instructions – as well as a little "oral Torah" ("neither shall you touch it") on to Eve. Though we don't know how much time had passed from when God gave His instructions to Adam to Eve's encounter with the talking serpent, it was enough time for Adam (or Eve) to add to what God had said. Knowing that Adam was willing to add to what God said, the serpent added something as well. He told Eve –

^{ESV} **Genesis 3:4-5** " ... You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So the first recorded lie is that man is immortal – he is like God himself - he cannot die. Since Adam – a human that was personally taught by God – believed the lie, is it then not surprising that so many now believe that every human being – at least in part – is immortal? So that begs the question – "does man have an immortal soul? Let's take a look! We'll begin by defining "soul".

Immortal Soul?

The first place we see the English word "soul" in scripture (KJV) is when God formed Adam –

^{KJV} **Genesis 2:7** 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**.

Here we find that when God took some dirt from the ground, fashioned it into a viable being, then breathed into what He had fashioned, that fashioned dirt became what the translators called a 'soul'. The Hebrew word is 'nephesh' (נֶפֶשׁ – 5315) and it comes from the root word 'naphash' (נָפַשׁ – 5314) which means to 'refresh'. One must be careful to note that the text does not say that the fashioned dirt became a living being with a soul, it simply says that the fashioned dirt became a "soul". In other words, a 'nephesh' - a soul - is a living, breathing being. If it is not alive and breathing, it is not a 'soul'.

It's interesting that when you get out of religious circles, this understanding is quite clear. For example, if an airplane pilot encounters a problem in flight and declares an emergency, one of the first questions an air traffic controller will ask is "how many souls on board?". With this information, they first responders know how many bodies to pull out of the plane if there is a crash. To them, a 'soul' is a person, not a spirit that cannot be seen.

Though this is the first place we see the Hebrew word 'nephesh' associated with a human being, it is not the first place we see the word 'nephesh'. We actually see it much earlier in regards to sea animals.

^{ESV} **Genesis 1:20-21** And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living **creatures**, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." ²¹ So God created the great sea



creatures and every living **creature** that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

In this passage, the word 'creature(s)' is 'nephesh', and if the translators had been consistent, they would have translated it into the word 'souls'. In other words, all the sea creatures are living "souls". If we go on to verse 24, we find that the land creatures are living 'souls' as well. In fact, verse 30 shows that all the living creatures on the earth are "souls".

So far we have seen that a 'soul' is living, breathing being. We've also seen that if a man sins, he will die. Therefore, we can draw these conclusions:

- if a man sins, he will die
- man is a soul
- all souls have sinned⁴
- souls can die; souls are not immortal

Knowing that the adversary's agenda is to make us believe that we "will not surely die", God made it very clear to Adam that since he had sinned, he would indeed die.

^{ESV} **Genesis 3:19** 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."

There are a number of scriptures that reiterate what was established in the Garden of Eden, but one that removes all doubt it found in the words of Solomon –

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 3:18-20** I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. ¹⁹ 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 (Hebrew – 'ruach'), and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.

So like the animals, man is a living soul that was created out of the dust and will return to dust. When they die, they both (man and animal) go to the same place – the grave. Again, there is no such thing as an 'immortal soul'.

Dead Souls have No Thoughts

I've often heard it said that when a person "goes to heaven" he or she is looking down upon us. I cannot imagine how horrifying that might be. To think that our parents or grandparents are looking down and seeing all the dumb, stupid, and sometimes harmful things we do to ourselves would cause one to be in a state of constant grief! But thankfully, there is no evidence in scripture that the dead have conscience thoughts.

Quoting again the words of Solomon, we find that there is no conscience thought in the grave.

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 9:10** Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

King David, in his many supplications to God for deliverance, makes the point that if he were to die, he would be unable to give God thanks and praise.

^{ESV} **Psalms 6:5** For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?

^{ESV} **Psalms 115:17** The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence.

⁴ excluding the Messiah



David’s thoughts concerning the grave are shared by his descendant, King Hezekiah, who wrote a poem after God added 15 years to his life. In it he said –

^{ESV} **Isaiah 38:17-19** Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back. ¹⁸ For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. ¹⁹ The living, the living, he thanks you, as I do this day; the father makes known to the children your faithfulness.

So the idea that man has an ‘immortal soul’ that continues to have conscience thought after death is not supported in the Tnakh⁵.

Spirit in Man?

What about the ‘spirit in man’? You will recall that when God made Adam, he was just a mass of formed clay until the point that God breathed into him.

^{KJV} **Genesis 2:7** 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.

When God breathed into Adam, he shared with him His own breath. The Hebrew word that is used here is ‘neshamah’ (נְשָׁמָה – 5397) and it is almost always translated ‘breath’. It is this breath of God that gives us life, but as the scripture points out, upon death, this ‘breath’ returns back to God. Elihu, in his rebuke of Job for claiming that God had dealt with him unjustly, said -

^{ESV} **Job 34:12-15** Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice. ¹³ Who gave him charge over the earth, and who laid on him the whole world? ¹⁴ If He should set His heart to it and gather to Himself His spirit and His breath⁶, ¹⁵ all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.

In other words, if God were to decide to withhold His breath from mankind, then all mankind would die. Though it is debatable whether the spirit and breath mentioned here are one and the same, a good case that they are the same can be made on the basis of what is known as ‘Hebrew parallelism’.

Parallelism is a Hebrew literary structure that – among other things - allows you to say the same thing in two different ways. In this passage we see parallelism in each verse:

| | | |
|--------|---|---------------------------------------|
| vs. 12 | God will not do wickedly | the Almighty will not pervert justice |
| vs. 13 | who gave Him charge? | who laid on him the whole earth? |
| vs. 14 | if He set His heart on (recalling) His spirit | if He gathered His breath |
| vs. 15 | all flesh would perish | man would return to dust |

As the chart shows, the thought at the beginning of the verse is reiterated in the end of the verse - to do wickedly is much the same as perverting justice.

Verse 14 is a little hard to reconcile with the King James English. The Hebrew words, when stated in order, literally say “if to set toward his heart his spirit, and breath to gather himself”. The Revised Standard Version and the New Jerusalem Bible render those words like this respectfully –

⁵ Tnakh (TNK) is an acronym for the Hebrew words ‘torah’ (instructions), ‘nevi’im’ (prophets), and ‘ketumim’ (writings), the three categories of scripture that are called the ‘Old Testament’ in Christian bibles. (Luke 24:44)

⁶ When compared to Job 32:8, some translations (ESV, LXX, TNK, NIV, RSV) consider the spirit and breath to be one and the same.



^{RSV} **Job 34:14** If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath ...

^{NJB} **Job 34:14** If he were to recall his spirit, to concentrate his breath back in himself ...

In verse 14, the Hebrew word for 'spirit' is 'ruach' (רוּחַ – 7307), a word that means 'wind'. In Hebrew thought, the spirit is like the wind – something you can feel, but you cannot see. The same holds true for 'breath', it is like a wind as well – when you breath out, you can feel it but you cannot see it. So, in a Hebrew sense, they are much the same. In fact, 'ruach' is translated as breath thirty-two times in the Old Testament. A good example of this is found earlier in the book of Job –

Job 4:8-9 As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. ⁹ By the breath (ruach) of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.

So the spirit in man and the breath of God are the same thing. It is what He breathed into Adam to give life to a lump of clay, and according to Job, it is what sets man apart from the beasts ⁷.

^{ESV} **Job 32:8** But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.

The breath of God, the spirit that comes from him, is what gives us the ability to reason and discern; and at death (according to Solomon) that spirit returns to God.

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 12:1,7** Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" ... ⁷and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. ⁸

Just as God's breath was joined to clay to give us life, when we die, the body turns back to clay and God's breath returns to him.

The Book of Life

Since upon death, the "soul" (nephesh) decays away and the spirit – the breath of life – returns to God, what becomes of us? Do we simply cease to exist? Not at all! Just as there remains physical records of our birth – birth certificate, school records, health records, and countless pictures and memories – God retains a record of us as well. We know it as the 'Book of Life'. In a Psalm where David again entreats God for protection, he makes a point of reminding God of the things He has written about him in His 'book'.

^{NKJ} **Psalm 56:8** You number my wanderings; Put my tears into Your bottle; *Are they* not in Your **book**?

In David's understanding, God is recording everything he does, down to the tears that he cries. They are written in a book that that could presumably be used at a later time to reveal everything he ever did. In a later Psalm, David shows that his entire life - including his bodily form - is written in God's book –

^{ESV} **Psalm 139:14-16** I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your **book** were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

⁷ Genesis 1 does not indicate that God breathed his breath of life into the animals. Though animals are dependent on breath much the same way as humans, the life in them is much like the life of other living things such as trees and flowers. Gen. 7:22 seems to apply to humans. In Hebrew text there is no punctuation or sentence breaks, therefore the phrase "and every man" that appears at the end of verse 21 fits better at the beginning of verse 22.

⁸ see also Ecc. 3:21



Apparently, God has a written record of all of us. This record includes who we are, what we are, what we think, and what we have done – both good and bad. It is from this book that God ‘reconstructs’ us at the resurrection.

Death is Like Sleep

Since the Book of Life has a record of our existence, what happens to us as we await the resurrection? According to scripture, we sleep.

When a person is asleep, he has no consciousness of time, no consciousness of what is going on around him, no anything. Though a person is not technically sleeping, God uses sleep to describe the state of the dead. David makes this connection in a psalm where he encourages God to act quickly on his behalf.

^{ESV} **Psalm 13:1** How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? ³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I **sleep the sleep of death** ...

Job, while lamenting the day he was born also used sleep to describe the state of the dead.

^{ESV} **Job 3:11-13** "Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire? ¹² Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should nurse? ¹³ For then I would have lain down and been quiet; I would have **slept**; then I would have been at rest,

In both of these cases, the Hebrew word for sleep/slept is ‘yashen’ (יָשַׁן – 3462), a word that literally means ‘to sleep’. The Septuagint translated ‘yashen’ using the Greek word ‘koimao’ {koy-mah-o} (Strong’s 2837) which is the same word used by John when he wrote about the death of Yeshua’s friend Lazarus.

^{ESV} **John 11:11-14** After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died ..."

This example, probably more than anywhere else in scripture, shows us how Yeshua himself viewed death. To him, Lazarus was asleep, awaiting the resurrection. Little did Lazarus know he would be awakened so soon.

The Awakening

So if death is like sleep, then our hope is that we will eventually wake up, and that is precisely what the scriptures say will take place.

In Isaiah 26, the prophet speaks of the “birthpains of the Messiah”, the time of trouble that we discussed at the beginning of this message. According to Jewish understanding, the beginning of the birthpains corresponds with the resurrection of the righteous dead. Isaiah appears to agree. As he begins his prophecy of this day, the prophet writes –

^{ESV} **Isaiah 26:19-21** 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. ²⁰ Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the fury has passed by. ²¹ For behold, the LORD is coming out from his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain.

Speaking of that same time, the prophet Daniel writes –



^{ESV} **Daniel 12:1** "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. ² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall **awake**, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Conclusion

When the breath of life returns to God, what was once a living soul immediately begins to decay and eventually returns to dust. All pain and conscious thoughts cease, and except for a record of him in God's 'book' and the records of him on earth, he ceases to exist. His soul is not sleeping; He is dead.

But death is not the end. There will be a resurrection, both for the just and the unjust. and as we continue through the festival season, we'll discuss these things in more detail. This should be comforting for those who are concerned about their loved ones, especially for those loved ones who may not be followers of the God of Israel.

So are the dead REALLY DEAD? Yes they are. Does man have an immortal soul that leaves the body at death and goes to a 'better place'? No. The scripture does not support that idea. Instead, it supports a time of judgment when all men will stand before their Creator, and only then will their fate be determined.

There is much more that could be said about the state of the dead, but we will close for now with Paul's words of encouragement.

^{ESV} **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18** ... 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. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Shalom Alecheim