



A Spiritual Encouragement Message September 18, 2020

1 Corinthians 11:30 - Spiritual or Physical Sleep?

by Andrew Lemus

Several years ago, in a Bible class we were going over the Lord's Supper and were studying 1 Corinthians 11. The text explains that the Corinthians were partaking of the Lord's Supper in "an unworthy manner" and as a result were becoming weak, sick, and many slept. A question was asked regarding what Paul meant by "many sleep" (1 Cor. 11:30). One sister believed that "sleep" was referring to spiritual death but I have always understood "sleep" to be referring to physical death. I had never heard or don't recall hearing that this text was speaking about spiritual death but I have heard numerous times that it was speaking about physical death. Like the good Bereans that I encourage others to be like, I went to the scriptures to see if what this sister was saying was true (Acts 17:11).

As most of you know, the context of 1 Corinthians 11:30 is in regard to the Lord's Supper. Paul is aggressively and adamantly stating that what they were doing was wrong. They were eating the bread to satisfy their appetites and they were getting drunk with the wine (1 Cor. 11:21-22). It was Paul's hope that they would have discerned and stopped their sinful behavior by themselves but since they were not, Paul, inspired by God, was obligated to condemn their actions (1 Cor. 11:31). His motivation to condemn their actions and discipline the church was so that they would not be condemned like every other sinner would be (1 Cor. 11:32). It was within this context that Paul states a fact regarding the church in Corinth. He tells them that due to their sins, many were weak, sick, and asleep (1 Cor. 11:30).

Spiritually Dead

Based on the context, there are a few reasons to believe that Paul was speaking about the Corinthians being spiritually weak, sick, and asleep. Consider for a moment Paul's motivation to tell them about their condition and evil actions (1 Cor. 11:21-22; 30). His motivation to condemn and chasten them was so that they might not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). It was Paul's desire that those who were spiritually weak, sick, and asleep would recognize their condemnation so that they would not be

condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). If sleep meant physical death in 1 Corinthians 11:30 then those who had physically died would have already been condemned with the world having physically died as a result of sin. An appropriate interpretation would be that Paul was telling them of their spiritual condition (spiritually asleep) so that they would not be condemned with the world (Ephesians 5:14; Mark 13:36).

There are strong and faithful brethren that believe “sleep” in 1 Corinthians 11:30 is in reference to spiritual death. James Coffman wrote, “The meaning which appears to be most likely is that Paul was speaking of those who had become spiritually weak and sickly, some no doubt having perished spiritually” (Coffman pg. 185). Brother Coffman believes that the word “sleep” would be too mild of a word for Paul to use if he was speaking about physical death. Whenever the word “sleep” is used in regard to the death of Christians it refers to those who have died but had not lost their salvation (Coffman pg. 185). Vines states that “sleep,” is used “of the death of the body, but only of such as are Christ’s” (Vines pg. 73). Therefore, it is believed that if “sleep” in 1 Corinthians 11:30 were to be interpreted to mean physical death then the Christians who had perished as a result of practicing sin would have perished in a right relationship with God. Coffman notes that the belief that this “sleep” is physical has “an echo of Calvinism” (Coffman pg. 185).

Physically Dead

As you can see there are a few reasons to believe that 1 Corinthians 11:30 is speaking about a spiritual death when it talks about sleep. But as the Proverb says, “The first one to plead his cause seems right, Until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17). Let’s look at some of the reasoning as to why some believe 1 Corinthians 11:30 is speaking about a physical death.

The context supports the belief that “sleep” is talking about physical death. Paul states that the Christians in Corinth were weak, sick, and asleep (dead) as a result of their sins (1 Cor. 11:29-30). Some argue that we are not spiritually weak and sick as a result of sin but rather we sin because we are spiritually weak and sick (1 Cor. 11:31). Therefore, it is argued that the Corinthians were spiritually weak and sick (1 Cor. 11:22, 31), sinned (1 Cor. 11:27, 29), and as a result were physically weak, sick, and dying (1 Cor. 11:30).

The context supports the belief that “sleep” is talking about physical death because there is no reason to conclude Paul is metaphorically speaking in 1 Corinthians 11:30. One of the most fundamental rules of biblical interpretation is that you always take a statement literally unless context would indicate otherwise. The surrounding context and book do not support the belief Paul is metaphorically speaking in 1 Corinthians 11:30. The word “sleep” (*koimao*) is used in 1 Corinthians six times and each time it is in reference to physical death (1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51). Also, Vines states that each word in 1 Corinthians 11:30, weak, sick, and asleep, is speaking about the physical (pg. 73, 1030, 1216). It is believed that to interpret 1 Corinthians 11:30 as spiritual would be to read into the text what the author never intended. One might say that to interpret “sleep” as spiritual death one would have to participate in eisegesis instead of exegesis.

Coffman and Vines both state that “sleep” when speaking about physical death is usually speaking only of those that are Christ’. In the first chapter of Corinthians Paul address’s the church as those who are “sanctified in the Lord” (vs. 2). Paul affirms that the church is saved, in Christ, and are in the light. A cursory reading of 1 Corinthians reveals that the church was far from perfect and in many areas engaged in sinful activities but none the less, they are still recognized as sanctified. Is it possible that a Christian or body of Christians can be in the light, sanctified, and right with God while they ignorantly indulge in sin? Is it possible that a one could be struck with physical weakness, illness, and even death as a result of sin while remaining in a sanctified relationship with God? If Coffman is accurate in his assessment of the word “sleep” as it pertains to the physical, then the answer to these questions would have to be in the affirmative.

There is a more general definition for the word sleep in 1 Corinthians 11:30 that could help us in our understanding of this text. Brother Wayne Jackson wrote...

“When Lazarus of Bethany died, Jesus informed the disciples: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” The Master’s men did not comprehend the nature of his language. They initially thought that Christ spoke of natural sleep; he therefore had to tell them plainly: “Lazarus is dead” (Jn. 11:14).

Why is death figuratively depicted as sleep? First, there is a common appearance between a sleeping body and a corpse. The analogy is thus quite natural.

Second, just as the soul of the sleeper still exists, though oblivious to its material surroundings, even so, in death the soul of man is not extinct; rather, it is only unaware of earth’s environment.”

<http://www.christiancourier.com/articles/753-the-biblical-concept-of-sleep>

Vines also notes that

“The early Christians adopted the word koimeterion (which was used by the Greeks as a rest-house for strangers) for the place of interment of the bodies of their departed; thence the English word ‘cemetery,’ ‘the sleeping place,’ is derived.”

So while the word “sleep” is often used in the New Testament to pertain to Christians who have perished in the Lord it has a more general meaning of someone who has died (1 Cor. 7:39). Therefore, using this interpretation, the "echo of Calvinism" could be silenced.

Conclusion

Whether 1 Corinthians 11:30 is speaking about the physical or spiritual, both are negative consequences to sinful activity. While there are some implications to be made as a result of whether this text is speaking about the physical or spiritual, the bottom line remains the same. The point of Paul’s admonition is to encourage the church to be right with God and to realize the error of their ways so that they will avoid eternal torment (1 Corinthians 11:32).