

What Does It Mean to “Fall Asleep In Christ”?

by John Hultink

Overview

WHAT HAPPENED ON Golgotha on Good Friday makes up the *heart* of the entire Scriptures. *Everything* in Scripture from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 can only be understood in light of what was accomplished on Golgotha. In the Old Testament everything that is recorded took place in anticipation of Golgotha. And in the New Testament everything that is revealed must be understood in light of what Jesus achieved on Golgotha.

A Christian will therefore appreciate that one’s understanding of Scripture is entirely dependent on one’s understating of Golgotha. What world-altering changes did Jesus bring to pass on Golgotha?

In the paper that follows, I will attempt to make clear what I believe happened prior to Golgotha, on Golgotha, and after Golgotha. What I believe happened is not always in line with the *conventional* view. To explain my point of view means that I have to appeal to many passages in Scripture; especially those relating to the New Testament phrase: “falling asleep in Christ.” That exercise has resulted in a paper that is now over 50 pages long. Not all my grandchildren and great grandchildren will be mature enough to deal with all those pages at this point in their lives. Therefore, for them and anyone else who can benefit, I have written a brief *overview* of those 50 pages. In a few introductory pages I will try to explain what I deal with in detail in the following 50 pages. Then those who

are not up to it do not have to read those 50 pages at this time.

As it turned out, the task of writing such an overview is not all that difficult. No one better than Jesus knew just how central Golgotha would become to the redemptive-historical unfolding of all of history. An unfolding which Jesus knew at the time would continue to take place for more than 2,000 years. For now we are already in the year 2025 A.D. That is, in *the year 2025 of our Lord*. And believers are still “falling asleep in Christ.” That is to say, when these believers die, they are not dead. Christ is their life (Col. 3:4). Our death is an instant transition to life **in Christ**.

The question then is: What did Jesus do *prior* to Golgotha that would help His followers understand what He achieved *on* Golgotha? For what Jesus achieved on Golgotha was no small thing. He re-established fellowship for believers with His Father by making them perfectly righteous. But He accomplished much more than that.

The most important thing Jesus accomplished for believers is that their *dying* becomes the *passage* to eternal life *at the very moment* that a believer dies. Yes, it boggles the mind. But how, you ask, does Jesus communicate such an incredible reality to believers who are still living on earth? Would believers not have to die to experience such a transition? And once a believer has died, would it not become impossible for that believer to communicate to believers back on earth what had happened? What a dilemma. How now to communicate the *heart* of what Jesus achieved on Golgotha to believers who have not yet died.

A dilemma for us but not for Jesus. Not for the firstborn over all creation in whom all things were created. And who has the power to create at will whenever He so desires.

In order to teach all of us who believe in Him what would shortly take place on Golgotha, Jesus did what only He as Creator can do. To all those who would come to belong to the Kingdom of God, He gave **two living testimonies** or *witnesses* of what would take place when a believer dies: the first witness is the daughter of Jairus, the second is Lazarus. Imagine that. Two living examples of what He would achieve for all believers of all time. And He provided believers of all time with those two witnesses *before* He went to Golgotha since His *public* ministry would *end* with Golgotha.

The First Living Witness

It happened about ten months before Jesus went to Golgotha. The daughter of Jairus who was about twelve years old had died. Jesus knew this. Nevertheless, when He arrived



Take note of the expression of joy on the face of the daughter of Jairus, and Jesus' expression of love.



Real to life illustrations by C. Jetses. What an artist. The viewer can sense Martha cautioning Jesus that her brother smells. Is she in for a surprise.

A FORETASTE OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING

Yes, a foretaste of His second coming

Only one event in all history rivals the significance of Golgotha: Christ's return. These two—Christ crucified and Christ returning—are inseparably linked. His return would be impossible had Golgotha not come first.

This relationship, while central, isn't always obvious. Therefore even before Golgotha, Jesus masterfully pointed to what His sacrifice would accomplish. In feats only the Creator could perform, He gave His followers glimpses—concrete, living signs—of the glory to come.

A foretaste! The fruit of Golgotha. Made visible in the awakening of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus.

Paul writes in Colossians 3:3–4: “You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God... When Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with Him.”

And Jesus foreshadowed that very truth—before the cross—when He appeared to Jairus' daughter and to Lazarus. Though they died, they lived. Because He appeared, they appeared. It was a foretaste of that great and final day when, in an instant, countless believers will appear at His appearance with Him in glory.

In raising them, Jesus gave us a preview of what's coming. Two real people. Two real resurrections. Two glimpses of that final and glorious appearing

at the young girl's house, He made this remarkable statement: "Stop wailing", Jesus said to the people who were wailing and mourning. **"She is not dead but asleep."** Amazing. Although Jesus knew she had died, yet He insisted that she was *not dead*. How is that possible? Is it possible to die and not be dead? As Paul will later explain, for Jesus all things are possible. So we will skip over 49 of the 50 pages that follow and go straight to what Paul has to say in Colossians 3:3-4. There we read in verse 3: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Take careful note of what Paul is saying. "You died and yet you are alive **with Christ**" (paraphrased).

Let's apply that biblical truth to the daughter of Jairus by including her *name* in that text: "For you, daughter of Jairus, died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." What Paul revealed to believers in Colossians 3:3, Jesus already knew when He informed the mourners that the daughter of Jairus was **not dead**.

This *reality* of not being dead becomes *even clearer* when the name of the daughter of Jairus is included in Colossians 3:4. Then we read:

"When Christ, *who is your life*, daughter of Jairus, appears, then you, daughter of Jairus, will also appear with him in glory."

Of course, we who are in possession of the entire New Testament now know that Paul was talking about the end of time, about Jesus' return on the clouds of the air.

However, what Paul reveals in Colossians 3:3-4 applies no less to the daughter of Jairus than it applies to us.

And do not overlook one mesmerizing reality: the daughter of Jairus did not have to wait for Christ's second coming. In her case, He had already come. When Jesus stood beside her bed and said: "My child, get up," He had already appeared. In Person! At His *first* coming. And this singular appearance enabled Jesus to provide you and me with the real-life example of what can happen when He appears at the time of His second coming. And so, at Jesus' appearance, the daughter of Jairus also appeared. Exactly as it will happen at the second coming when Jesus appears. So, when Jesus declared to the mourners that the daughter of Jairus was not dead, He knew that believers would grasp the full import of what He was saying *when the New Testament in its entirety came into their possession*.

The wonder of the awakening of the daughter of Jairus was intended by Jesus to teach you and me that **when we die, we are not dead** either. Not after Golgotha and after Colossians 3:3-4 is published. When we die, we are alive in Christ. **He is our life!** That is what it means, in part, to “fall asleep in Christ.” And as we will come to see, we do not actually fall asleep. The emphasis is actually on *rest*.

That is, among other things, what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha: He became our life. We live in Him until the second coming. And like the daughter of Jairus as well as Lazarus to whom He appeared a little later, we live **in Him** until He also appears to us on the last day. What a God. What a Saviour. Golgotha teaches us that it is possible to die and not be dead. We are asleep, or if you will, we are at rest in Him.

That, dear reader, in a nutshell, is what the following 50 pages are all about.

1. Introduction to the Main Article

What the first Adam ruinously turned upside down in the Garden of Eden, the second Adam once again gloriously turned right-side up on Golgotha. These two events both had world-altering implications. In each instance they involved our very lives. Think merely of Noah’s universal flood. And what happened there. Then think of Golgotha where the Son of God died to rescue the creation, including mankind from oblivion. For God the Father so loved the world (cosmos). Christ not only re-established perfect fellowship with the Father for us, He also gave us eternal life. Eternal life in spite of the on-going knowledge and experience of sin in the flesh. Eternal life as a result of which it will never again be possible to sin or die.

2. Defining the Phrase “Falling Asleep in Christ”

2.1 Misinterpretations and Neglect

It is never particularly gratifying to take a relentlessly negative attitude toward the views of others in their discussion of a particular New Testament theme. Nevertheless, I concede that such is the case on my part when it comes to the New Testament theme of “falling asleep in Christ.” But before I say anything critical of the *conventional* interpretation of this New Testament phrase, I should discuss what I understand this phrase to actually mean.

Let it be emphasized at the outset that the New Testament revelation about the meaning of “falling asleep in Christ” has no relationship to the heresy referred to as “soul-

sleep.” The heretical view of “soul sleep” teaches that the soul becomes unconscious or ceases to exist between death and the resurrection, denying the conscious existence of the soul¹ (person) during the intermediate state, contrary to Scripture’s testimony (e.g., Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:8). According to Colossians 3:3, “we died and our *lives* are now hidden with Christ in God.” I will return to the profound meaning of this reference, as well as the verse that follows in Colossians, momentarily.

The phrase “falling asleep” in the New Testament is always a reference to “falling asleep *in Christ*”, even if the phrase “in Christ” does not accompany the phrase “falling asleep.” Only Christians experience the reality of “falling asleep” as discussed in the New Testament.

2.2 Biblical Meaning and Distinction from “Soul Sleep”

The word “sleep” in the phrase “falling asleep in Christ” is indeed a metaphor—but not for “death,” as is commonly assumed. It is often also treated as a euphemism by many theologians. It is neither. Rather, it is a *redemptive* metaphor for “rest,” for a state of inactivity (see esp. Rev. 14:13).

To understand the broader meaning of *rest*, consider my father as an example. When we first immigrated to Canada, he worked for a company called Dominion Die—a steel manufacturer. His job required him to rotate through all three shifts, including the midnight to 8 a.m. shift. This meant he would sleep during the day. Sometimes he would sleep for several hours, sometimes he would read for a while, or simply lie there and relax—resting. He might even use that time to plan the day’s activities. But one thing was certain: he would not take part in those activities until he got up.

In the same way, when we “fall asleep in Christ,” we lose the active use of our bodies. We are, quite literally, at rest. In Christ.

I believe that the phrase “falling asleep,” does indeed refer to losing the use of our bodies. Our physical bodies are destroyed (2 Cor. 5:1), returning to dust, while our spirit—the breath of life—returns to God.² That is how we describe this reality in *earthly* terms.

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1. Unfortunately, hundreds of years before Christ, the Greeks philosophically secularized the biblical meaning of the word “soul,” which biblically conveys the meaning of *life* rather than an absolutized part thereof.
 2. Many believers want to get into the specifics, *where* is the soul of man when he “falls asleep in Christ”, and while I attempt to answer this question by consulting Scrip-

But Scripture presents this reality quite differently. There is a profound distinction between how reality is perceived from an *earthly* (immanent³) perspective and how it is revealed from a *heavenly* (transcendent⁴) perspective.

From a transcendent perspective, Christ has become our life (Col. 3:3-4). That is quite a revelation: **in Christ** (see Col. 1). We are no longer functioning participants in the mainstream of life. We have become inactive, like those who have “fallen asleep.” And sleep as used here by the New Testament is not a metaphor for death as commonly believed. Rather, it is a metaphor for rest, for being conscious but inactive. It denotes that believers have lost the *use* of their bodies and that their lives are now “hidden **in Christ**.” And it is when Christ appears at the second coming that those who are resting (fallen asleep) will appear with Him. They will have use of their glorified bodies. More about that later.

3. A New Testament Theme: The Use of Sleep Language

There are almost **twenty** instances in which the phrase “falling asleep” (Gr. *koimao*) is referenced in the New Testament. By examining most of these New Testament references in this paper, the *meaning* of the phrase should become clear. As a result of the discussion

ture, we ought to remember that we can only know as much as Scripture reveals; beyond that, we must concede that, like the doctrine of the Trinity, there is an element of mystery, *Mysterium Tremendum*. So while Scripture does provide some clarity on “falling asleep in Christ”, it does not provide us with exhaustive detail, and we should therefore temper our expectations. The details will become clear to us when we no longer see through a glass darkly.

3. **Immanent (earthly)** refers to that which is within or inherent to the created order. It denotes the perspective of life as experienced within time, space, and material reality—what can be seen, touched, and measured. An *immanent* viewpoint focuses on the here and now, on natural processes and human perception.
4. **Transcendent (heavenly)**, on the other hand, refers to that which is beyond or above the created order. It speaks of God’s divine perspective—eternal, sovereign, and unlimited by the constraints of time or matter. A *transcendent* viewpoint reveals the deeper meaning and ultimate truth of reality as God sees it, not as it appears to finite mankind. So when Jesus declares that the daughter of Jairus is not dead, *she is not dead*. Immanent appearances notwithstanding.

of these references it will hopefully also become clear that “falling asleep in Christ” is indeed an important *theme* which permeates the entire New Testament. It is important to remember that the discussion of falling sleep was first publicly initiated by Jesus on two occasions *before* He went to Golgotha. This was outlined in the overview and will be discussed in more detail. These occasions were the raising of the daughter of Jairus as well as Lazarus. These will also be discussed in their redemptive-historical context.

3.1 Paul’s Teaching in 1 Thessalonians

Of all the New Testament texts that I could refer to in order to initiate this discussion about sleep, it may be most helpful to reflect on Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. To place this discussion in historical perspective, it is believed that Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica, with perhaps the exception of an early date for Galatians (47-48 AD), was Paul’s earliest canonical letter (Cf. *NIV Study Bible*). I do not believe it is possible to deal more directly and more intimately with the meaning of “falling asleep in Christ” than Paul does in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

The Thessalonians have adopted misleading assumptions about fellow believers who have recently died. They are concerned that their relatives, acquaintances, and friends who have recently died are going to miss out on Jesus’ second coming, which they expect soon. That is clearly the conclusion they have arrived at in their expression of concern to Paul. Therefore, Paul addresses them with the following words:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep (*koimōmenōn*), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Paul comes straight to the point. He does not want the Thessalonians to be ignorant about what happens when a fellow believer dies. Only Paul does not refer to their dying as death at this point, which the Old Testament did most emphatically. Not that Paul is in the least reticent about referring to the dead as being dead (see verse 16). And as we will soon come to realize, describing those who have died as having fallen asleep is a powerful, biblical way of referring to the dead *after Golgotha*. The dead are now said to have fallen asleep **in Christ**. Paul indeed prefers to identify those who have died (Gr. *nekros*) in Christ as having “fallen asleep (in Christ).” Which Paul indeed does repeatedly in verses 13 to 15 and elsewhere. With the New Testament in hand we realize that there could be

no reference to “falling asleep in Christ” in the Old Testament since Christ was not yet a historical reality and could not have gone to Golgotha (see Rev. 14:13).

3.2 *The Threefold Repetition of Sleep Language*

Note the encompassing repetition of the word “sleep” carefully:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are *asleep* (*koimōmenōn*), 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* (*koimēthentas*).

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* (*koimēthentas*).

The reader could hardly ask for a more convincing testimony that believers who die in the New Testament are in truth said by Scripture to be **asleep** or resting, inactive. I believe the reason the word “*dead* in Christ” is used in verse 16 rather than sleep is because it refers to those “who will rise first” from an earthly, immanent point of view. Everyone knows where to find the bodies of their loved ones. It is confusing in this context to associate *rising* (from the dead) with sleep when “sleep” in fact conveys a state of wakefulness and transcendence. The emphasis on sleep in this context, then, is on *rest*, on being inactive, or no longer being part of the mainstream of life.

3.3 *1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*

The overall revelation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is unmistakable. Paul wishes to make it clear that relatives and friends who have died, that is, “fallen asleep in Christ,” will not be at a disadvantage over those who are still alive when Jesus returns. As a matter of fact, says Paul, those who have “fallen asleep” will meet Jesus *before* those who are still alive at the second coming.⁵ The living, or conscious, have no advantage over the dead, or asleep,

5. Since the *conventional* understanding of what happens when a believer dies (falls asleep) is that the believer goes to heaven to continue his or her earthly existence there, if true, could Paul not have simply told the Thessalonians: “Your relatives are

when Jesus returns. According to verse 16, those who are dead, that is, have “fallen asleep in Christ” will meet Christ first. Yes, first! *Then* those who are still alive will join them. And most remarkably, having by then been given our spiritual bodies, we will all “be caught up together in the clouds *to meet the Lord in the air*.” Apparently we will no longer be subject to our old three-dimensional reality.

Paul’s response to the concerns of the Thessalonian church is most revealing. It is an answer the Thessalonians most definitely did not expect. Would you and I have expected such an answer? Or are you going to heaven when you “die” to continue life there? On three occasions, in three separate verses, and in quick succession, Paul informs the Thessalonians that their relatives and friends who have died *are in truth not dead*. Apparently, according to verse 15, Paul was acquainted with the awakening of the daughter of Jairus. How could leaders in the New Testament church not be? So, to repeat Paul’s words, to be certain that we understood Paul correctly:

¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are *asleep* [at rest] (*koimōmenōn*), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Paul seldom refers to members of the congregation who have died as being dead. When he does, it is for the sake of clarity. He repeatedly identifies those who have died as being “*asleep*.” That is to say: “being at rest” and living in fellowship with Christ as described in Colossians 3:3-4. No details are provided, but these believers are said to be in a *hidden* state IN CHRIST. Why?

Paul refers to the members of the congregation who died as those “who fall asleep”, because once Golgotha is part of history, the presence of *death* no longer enters into the picture for Christians. In ordinary speech, when it is said that someone is asleep, it is understood that that person is not dead. Paul most emphatically *introduces* the new reality (v. 15a) that *believers* who die, in truth, “fall asleep.” The different word naturally indicates a different state of being. We will come to see that this entails they have a conscious presence with Christ—unlike unbelievers who have no hope when they die, and who are indeed dead. And being “asleep” is most definitely not a metaphor or euphemism for believers actually being dead, despite what several study Bibles and other literature claim.

living in heaven with Jesus, they are already living the perfect life”? But he did not do that. Why not? Why does Paul keep insisting that they are resting? As does Jesus.

Listen to what Paul instructs Christians to *actually* believe about “dying” and “death”:

¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him [at the resurrection] *those who have fallen asleep (koimēthentas)* [Those who are, during the interim, at rest **in Him**.]

Paul herewith provides additional insight into the event of what transpires when a Christian dies. Death, in the case of a Christian, is declared by Paul to be **sleep** which is a metaphor for **rest**. The Christian is declared to have fallen asleep **in Christ**. And since “sleep” is a metaphor for rest, it denotes a conscious state. More on that later in relation to what Colossians has to say on the subject. Dying, after Golgotha, is now described by Paul to be a most remarkable event. The death of the Christian is here being characterized not only as *sleep* but as a “falling asleep *in Christ*.”⁶ Even as we existed in Christ before the foundation of the earth (Eph. 1:4). We will come back to both the meaning of “sleep” in this context as well as the New Testament meaning of “falling asleep *in Christ*.”

Then follows that important verse 15 of this most remarkable revelation:

¹⁵ **For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord,**⁷ that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede *those who have fallen asleep (koimēthentas)*.

There you have it! Paul declares that he received the *insight* that after Golgotha, believers are not dead by means of “a word from the Lord.” In the same way that Christ could speak of Jairus’ daughter and of Lazarus, as not being dead, He now declares that all believers who have come to the end of their natural life have in fact “fallen asleep in Christ.” To repeat, Paul received this insight (v. 15) **“by a word from the Lord.”**

For the third time in three short verses, Paul emphasizes once again that Christians who die *in truth* “fall asleep in Christ.” As a result of these comments by Paul to the Thes-

6. Note: It is important for the reader to realize that any reference to the believer “falling asleep” always entails that the believer falls asleep **in Christ**. A few comments about the beauty and power of the phrase **in Christ** will follow.

7. Emphasis added.

salonians, it can hardly be denied that believers who have died have in fact “fallen asleep in Christ.” And it will become clearer what that phrase means. Especially from what Paul writes in Colossians 3:1-4. For us Christians, two thousand years later, what does this incredible revelation entail? How are we to understand Paul’s words and the many additional references he and others make to “falling asleep” in the New Testament? And what is Paul actually saying when he declares that he gained this insight as “a word from the Lord”?

4. The Return of Christ and the Awakening of Those Asleep

4.1 The Order of Resurrection

Paul then concludes his explanation to the Thessalonians about what happens when a Christian dies. In verse 16a we read:

¹⁶For 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.

Most of what is recorded in this first letter to the church in Thessalonica is revealed in greater detail to believers in what may be referred to as the resurrection chapter, that is, 1 Corinthians 15. But of particular interest now is what Paul writes in the rest of that verse:

...And the dead in Christ will rise first.

4.2 Transcendence and Immanence in Resurrection Language

This time those believers who are repeatedly said to have fallen asleep on three separate occasions are now suddenly referred to as *the dead in Christ*. This happens on more than one occasion in the New Testament. Why? Probably because this time the reference stresses the reality that “the dead” are now viewed as being **on earth** in their tombs. See also 1 Corinthians 15:35 where we read, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” There is a definite tension between the earthly and heavenly perspectives.

The declaration that they are asleep stresses the reality that they are *with* Christ, *hidden in Him* and experiencing a conscious bliss. But here in v. 16 the focus is on the

body. I believe that the two realities, that of “falling asleep in Christ” (transcendental) and that of being “the dead *in Christ*” (immanent) are the same reality, seen from two different points of view. Viewed from an immanent, earthly vantage point, believers who have died are said to be “dead in Christ.” After all, we do have our cemeteries. But viewed from a transcendent vantage point, in terms of a heavenly reality (Col. 3:1-2), believers are said to have “fallen asleep in Christ.” They are experiencing a conscious relationship with Christ (Phil. 1:23-26; Col. 3:3-4). But this is not the same as taking up residence with fellow Christians in heaven, as commonly believed.

Paul then concludes the discussion by informing the reader what actually happens at the time of Christ’s return. Amazingly, these believers who are declared to have “fallen asleep in Christ” will accompany Christ upon His return to earth. They will *appear* with Him first (that is, they will no longer be “hidden” by receiving their spiritual bodies⁸) and they together with Christ will meet those Christians (who will never die but who do receive their spiritual bodies) *in the air*. Truly amazing. If Christians cannot confess that God has supreme, consummate, matchless control over all creation they should examine the nature of their faith. Is there anything God in Jesus Christ can’t do? Imagine millions and millions of Christians together with Christ **in the air**. And Christians on earth joining them. The reason, I believe, we all meet in the air is to give Christ an opportunity to cleanse the earth to its pre-fallen state.

The Thessalonians drew mistaken conclusions about what happens to loved ones who have died because their gaze was rivetted horizontally on earth. They seriously misunderstood the reality of the situation. The “lives” of their relatives were already with Christ (Col. 3:3). The truth of the matter, explains Paul, is that those believers who have died are in truth *not dead*, as Jesus stated emphatically about the daughter of Jairus. They are in truth alive and with Jesus. That state of being, although as mystery (*Mysterium Tremendum*), is captured in the New Testament by the phrase “falling asleep.” Their lives are now *hidden* with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). That is in part what it means that these believers are said to have “fallen asleep in Christ.” They are at rest (see Rev 14:13). How that takes place and what that means, I hope to discuss momentarily in more detail.

8. Contrary to the nonsense theistic evolutionists encourage us to believe.

5. “According to the Lord’s Own Word” – Jesus and Sleep

5.1 *The Study Bible Discrepancy*

Meanwhile, in order to arrive at a biblical and deeper understanding of the phrase: “falling asleep”, it is extremely important to return to verse 15a and the meaning of the words: **“According to the Lord’s own word”** (NIV). The ESV translates the Greek of this text somewhat differently: “And for this we declare to you *by a word from the Lord...*” But in both instances it comes down to Paul claiming that he is acquainted with “*a word from the Lord.*” Is Paul not stating that Jesus addressed the topic of “falling asleep” at some point during His ministry prior to Golgotha, since that is when His earthly ministry ended? But the theologians say they cannot find that reference. They have concluded that Paul’s reference to “a word from the Lord” does not exist within the pages of holy Scripture.

But surely, the plain reading of v. 15a is that “According to the Lord’s own word” [about “falling asleep in Christ,” since that is what this discussion is all about], Paul is stating that Jesus, during His ministry on earth and prior to Golgotha, addressed the issue of “falling asleep (in Christ).” To quote Paul’s exact words (v. 15b): “those alive will not precede those *who have fallen asleep.*” Yes, according to the Lord’s own word. But that is not what is recorded in the NIV and ESV Study Bibles. These two study Bibles, popular among evangelical Christians, appear to explain away this *assertion* by Paul. The *NIV Study Bible*, for example, does that as follows:

The doctrine [of Jesus] mentioned here [falling asleep in Christ] *is not recorded in the Gospels* (emphasis added) and was either a direct revelation to Paul or something Jesus said that Christians passed on orally.

Therefore, according to the *NIV Study Bible*, Paul is mistaken. Jesus never addressed the issue of Christians falling asleep during His ministry on earth.

The *ESV Study Bible* explains its denial of the event somewhat differently, while arriving at the same conclusion. According to the ESV:

“Word from the Lord” [as quoted by Paul] probably refers to something the Lord revealed personally to Paul, which he then states in vv. 15b-17.

Here, we have two apparent assertions in popular study Bibles that Jesus never addressed the issue of “falling asleep” during His ministry on earth prior to Golgotha. And most theologians agree with that point of view. See especially the book *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn. Together these theologians have decided that the word “sleep,” as used in reference to the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus, is actually a metaphor or euphemism for death. This Jesus categorically denies. By means of wordplay, these authors nullify Jesus’ **world-altering claim** that the daughter of Jairus **is not dead**. He, Jesus Christ, is her life (Col. 3:4). Does such a view not undermine the Christian’s understanding of what happened on Golgotha? Does this view not trivialize the Golgotha event by suggesting that “Today, with me in Paradise” is about taking up residence in heaven rather than having been granted righteous fellowship in Christ? The criminal *declared* prophetically that Jesus was going to come into His kingdom. He did not ask about heaven. He had no “sense” of heaven.

In both instances above, the NIV and ESV Study Bible commentaries state that a reference to Paul having received “a word from the Lord” addressing the question of “falling asleep” is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. Paul received no such word. They have both decided that *sleep* is a metaphor or euphemism for *death* and that therefore the daughter of Jairus must be viewed as being dead. Never mind what Jesus has to say on the subject. Both study Bibles also translated the Greek word (*koimaomai*) for “sleep” as “dead.” As we will see, such an interpretation completely missed the point.

How then can Paul state with the authority of Scripture that he is familiar with the doctrine of “falling asleep”, “according to the Lord’s own word”?

The ESV and NIV study Bibles are mistaken. It is as simple as that. What these scholarly study Bibles have done is make a claim that altogether dismisses the “falling asleep” and awakening references not only **in relation to the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21-43; Matt. 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56) as well as Lazarus (John 11)**, but to **all** falling asleep references in the entire New Testament. The “doctrine” of *not* being dead but instead “falling asleep in Christ” is a new reality recorded in the Gospels after Golgotha. A reality that nevertheless is discussed in some detail by Jesus *prior* to going to Golgotha. Jesus declares categorically that the daughter of Jairus who, though she died, **IS NOT DEAD!** How can He do that? Because He knows that when she dies, her life will be *hidden* with Christ in God (Col. 3:3-4). In the case of Lazarus, He even *waits* for Lazarus to die before He declares that Lazarus has **fallen asleep** and that He is going to Bethany to wake him. When Paul said in verse 15 of 1 Thessalonians 4 that he became acquainted with the doc-

trine of falling asleep “according to the Lord’s own word”, he was indeed referring to the awakenings of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus that took place prior to Golgotha. Jesus was prophetically demonstrating by the awakenings of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus **what** He was soon to achieve on Golgotha. Believers who died would not remain dead. But the NIV and ESV apparently cannot concede this point, I believe, because they have bought into the conventional view that sleep is either a metaphor or euphemism for *death*, and that the believer goes to heaven to continue life there when he or she dies. As a result of this mistaken view, they end up declaring the exact opposite of what Jesus is attempting to teach believers about what will happen as a result of Golgotha.

5.2 *The Awakening of Jairus’ Daughter*

We are not provided with the names of the total number of believers who died during the period of Jesus’ ministry on earth and who were subsequently brought back to life. We do however know that only three such awakenings are recorded in Scripture. This *narrow* field of *recorded* awakenings should tell the reader something in and of itself. We are told about the widow’s son, that he was brought back to life out of compassion. The daughter of Jairus and Lazarus were brought back to life accompanied by short but remarkable commentaries by Jesus about their deaths. In the case of the daughter of Jairus, about ten months before His own death, Jesus declared the following remarkable revelation: “Go away’ He said [to the professional mourners], **‘the girl is not dead but sleeping’**” (Luke 8:52). The response of the crowd, the mourners and flute players to this amazing revelation was that they “laughed Him to scorn” (Luke 8:53, KJV). They ridiculed Jesus. But take note of what happens next. Jesus went into the young girl’s room accompanied by her parents as well as Peter, James, and John. As referenced in Colossians 3:4, He thereby *appeared* to her. And as a result of His appearance, she *appeared*. That is, she came back to life. Jesus then came out of that room a few moments later accompanied by the young girl, alive! Here we have a powerful witness to the reality expressed in Colossians 3:3-4 that **Jesus is the girl’s life**. As Jesus said: “*She is not dead but asleep*”, at rest. I am her life! She had fallen asleep **in Christ**.⁹ That is the reality conveyed by the repeated references in the New Testament about **in** Him and **in** Christ. That is why Jesus could categorically say that **she is not dead**. “I am her life. Even as I am the life of millions who confess

9. Every theologian worth his salt should read Andree Troost, *What is Reformational Philosophy?* on the meaning of “**In Him**” (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press).

my name and fall asleep. Who rest.” The crowd stared in dumbfounded amazement and incredulity. The girl was standing beside Jesus. She was not dead as Jesus had declared. Who was this who declared the dead to be alive? And so the spectators were deeply ashamed of their unbelief. As should we be when we declare that sleep is a metaphor for death instead of rest.

And the writers of the NIV and ESV Study Bibles ought also to be deeply concerned about their failure to understand Paul’s comment: “according to the Lord’s own word.” They failed to grasp the issue of falling asleep on two separate occasions. And they failed to make the connection to Golgotha. And should these study Bibles not now abandon their respective beliefs that sleep is a metaphor or euphemism for **death**? Their teaching is the *opposite* of what Jesus is trying to teach, is it not? Does their mistaken view not trivialize the Golgotha event?

6. Contrasting Old and New Testament Uses of “Sleep”

6.1 *From Daniel to Golgotha*

Important for the purposes of our discussion is the realization that Jesus’ picturing death as sleep in the case of both the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus is different – in principle – from the reference of death as sleep in Daniel 12:2. There we read “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake [at the resurrection¹⁰], some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” There is a world of difference between sleeping “in the dust of the earth” and “falling asleep in Christ.” **And the difference is Golgotha.** In the case of Daniel, sleep is indeed a reference to the sleep of death (this phrase also appears in Psalm 13:3). In the case of the daughter of Jairus, and later in the case of Lazarus, the believer will come to believe that sleep must be understood in anticipation of what Jesus would accomplish on Golgotha! Yes, Golgotha! These two awakenings were teaching lessons by Jesus. The **key** to understanding Paul’s many references to death as sleep must be understood in terms of what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha. He destroyed the power and consequence of death for believers (see Matt. 27:50-53). In these verses, God the Father testifies to what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha – the torn curtain in the temple and the return to life of many believers who had *fallen asleep*. That is quite a testimony, coming from the Father.

10. Perhaps already as a result of Golgotha.

6.2 *Falling Asleep in Christ: A Post-Golgotha Reality*

Once the content of the New Testament appears in print, the believer who reads it comes to realize that “death”, when characterized as “sleep” becomes an important New Testament reality and **theme**. *Death* is *no longer* to be understood as “having fallen asleep” in the dust of the earth (Dan. 12:2), but as having fallen asleep *in Christ*, a truth which had not yet been *historically* realized in Old Testament times. In 1 Corinthians 15:14-20 we read:

¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised [Note the vital role of the resurrection], then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [Was that not the case with Old Testament believers?] ¹⁸ Then those also **who have fallen asleep** (*koimēthentes*) **in Christ** [New Testament reality] have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those **who have fallen asleep** (*kekoimēmenōn*).

Yes, clearly. Christ is our life! We died in Him and we are raised in Him.

Note how Christ is said to be both “dead” and “fallen asleep.” Yes, even Jesus is said to have “fallen asleep” when He died as the second Adam. Is the New Testament’s repeated reference to falling asleep in Christ not beginning to impress itself upon you, the reader, as a post-Golgotha reality?

This New Testament reality of “falling asleep in Christ” is made possible by **Golgotha**.¹¹ This will become evident *after* the world-altering event of Golgotha when “falling asleep” becomes a new reality and a New Testament *theme*. This new meaning, after Golgotha, of sleep as a living rest, is so important that the New Testament records a second witness to confirm its reality. Jesus once again refers to someone who died as having “fallen asleep.” This is because of the biblical preference for two witnesses. Shortly before Jesus’ own death, Jesus said to His disciples: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,

11. Old Testament believers died in *anticipation* of this event. I am inclined to believe that after the event of Golgotha, falling asleep in Christ became a reality for them as well (see esp. Rev. 14:13).

but I go to awaken him.” Once again, Jesus establishes a relationship between death and sleep. Someone who died is said to have “fallen asleep.” Why? Because He knows that He is that person’s life. Christ will become the life of that believer (Col. 3:4). That is why Jesus said about the daughter of Jairus: “She is not dead, she is asleep.” He had become her life. Death after Golgotha is transformed into sleep for the believer, into rest, and into life in the presence of Jesus for the believer (Col. 3:4; Rev. 14:13).

I believe that the twofold awakenings of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus prior to Golgotha are to be understood **after** Golgotha as “*teaching lessons*.” They are to be placed in the larger context of what the New Testament has to say about what now becomes a *theme* in the New Testament of “falling asleep in Christ.” Our lives, says Paul later in Col. 3:3-4, are hidden **in Christ**. *Hidden* because we have lost the use of our bodies. Post-Golgotha! That is what it means, I believe, in part, to fall asleep in Christ. He is our life. As He was before the foundation of the world.

6.3 Revelation 12 and Its Implications

The full impact of what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha is revealed to the believer in the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation. Here the believer is informed of what happened when Jesus ascended victoriously into heaven forty days after His resurrection. In verse 5(b) we read: “And her [Mary’s] child was snatched up to God and to His throne.” The *consequences* of that liberating ascension, which occurred in real time, 40 days after Jesus’ resurrection, are recorded in verses 7 to 9:

⁷Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Golgotha. Yes, as a result of Christ’s ascension to the right hand of God the Father, after Golgotha, there was war in heaven. Try to imagine that for a moment. Heaven is not lily white. There are sinners in heaven. Satan is challenging the authority of God while Christ is being seated on His right hand. Again! As in the beginning! This time Michael and his angels are instructed to throw the dragon and his disobedient angels out of heav-

en. Finally. After 4,000 years. As a result of this battle, the dragon and his demonic angels lose their place in heaven. This happens as God the Father seats His Son at His right hand. The connection between Christ being seated and Satan and his fallen angels being thrown out of heaven is of world-altering importance. Believers, even though they still sin, are now viewed *righteous* in Christ.

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “**Now** [emphasis added] the salvation and the power and the kingdom [the *very kingdom* the criminal on the cross referred to during their short dialogue which he said *Jesus was coming into*] of our God and the authority of his Christ have come [as a result of Golgotha], for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God” (Rev. 12:10).

The foundational change in reality which Jesus accomplished on Golgotha meant that the dragon, Satan, had lost his **juridical** right to accuse the elect. The elect were now righteous *in Christ*. The elect were now viewed by the Father as “perfectly righteous”. And so the Father tore down the curtain of separation. The Father acknowledged this in response to the ransom paid by Jesus with His own blood on Golgotha. This **new** reality of falling asleep in Christ constitutes the **NOW** of Golgotha. It is unthinkable (Matt. 27:51-52) that Satan can any longer accuse the elect *in the presence* of Jesus Christ who now sits with His pierced hands and feet at the right hand of His Father. **Unthinkable!** (Yes, I am shouting). That is why we read in Revelation 1:4b to 6:

...Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, **and the ruler of kings on earth** [emphasis added]. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Yes, *forever*. And this forever began on Ascension Day.

These words are a present reality. Satan has been defeated. The Holy Spirit will invade the hearts of millions. Christ rules. He has freed us from the accusations of Satan.

Christ’s blood now assures us of our **new** legal standing. He has freed us from sin, the sin He took upon Himself. All of it. And has done so for 2,000 years since Golgotha. Gathering the elect. God works historically. The mistaken expectation on the part of the Thesalonians was a-historical. They expected redemptive history to end in a few years. That was not the Father’s intention. As we now well know.

Again in Revelation 12:10-13:

¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now [at the time of Christ’s ascension] the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God [Yes, Mr. criminal. You were prophetic.] and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down [present event], who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! [Satan is gone.] But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” ¹³ And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down [present event] to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

The **NOW** of Golgotha and Christ’s ascension on His Father’s right hand is the reality that Satan has been hurled down to the earth. Never to return. The dragon has lost his legal right founded in God’s justice to any longer accuse the elect. As he did with Job. But the **NOT YET** of Christ’s ascension is that Satan will yet pursue the elect *on earth* until Christ’s second coming. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of believers are being added to the kingdom of God (Matt. 22:1-14). God knows what He is doing. Historically! Thanks be to God for Pentecost, the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit – a reality that has made it possible for the elect to overcome the power and temptation of Satan who is now raising hell on earth. To those who overcome, Christ will give the right to eat from the tree of life which the elect will find in the Paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). Until the time comes when Christ returns, the lives of the believers who have fallen asleep will continue to be hidden with Christ in God.¹² When Christ appears at His second coming, the believers will then *appear* with Him having received their spiritual and glorified bodies.

12. Now also including Old Testament believers?

They will *appear* and they will be no longer be *hidden* in Christ. They will then live with Christ in glory forever and ever (Col. 3:3-4). The reality here described is, in part, what I believe the New Testament describes as “falling asleep in Christ.” Sleep in this context refers primarily to *rest*. It is a conscious presence **in Christ** which Paul describes in Philippians 1:23 as being *with Christ* to await the second coming. And this is better by far. Therefore as Paul informed the Thessalonians, those who have fallen asleep in Christ are most definitely not at a disadvantage to the living.

6.4 The Daughter of Jairus and Lazarus

At this point, I would like to turn our attention to Luke 8:52 in regard to Jairus’ daughter, and John 11:11 in regard to Lazarus, and Jesus’ reference on **both** occasions to death as “sleep.” These are the historical incidents I believe Paul is referring to when he says: “According to the Lord’s own word” (1 Thess. 4:15).

During Jesus’ earthly ministry, He may have raised many people from the dead, but only the widow’s son, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus are named in the New Testament. The last two are named because the Holy Spirit wants us to understand these awakenings as an important teaching moment: in the presence of Jesus, death no longer has its hold on the believer. Death is a transition. When Jesus says Jairus’ daughter is “not dead but asleep” (Matt. 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52), He is not speaking metaphorically or euphemistically. He intends His words to be taken literally. He is revealing that for believers, death has been transformed into a temporary sleep (rest) because He Himself **is** “the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25). During the interim our lives are hidden **with Christ**. And Paul declares that such is a truly wonderful existence.

Similarly, regarding Lazarus, Jesus tells His disciples that Lazarus has “fallen asleep” and that He is going to “awaken him” (John 11:11). Although the disciples misunderstand and think He speaks of natural sleep, Jesus concedes to their unbelief and clarifies that Lazarus is dead in terms of their understanding of reality.

Both awakenings serve a deeper purpose. The raising of Jairus’ daughter, *witnessed* by Peter, James, and John (they should have remembered this in the case of Lazarus), and that of Lazarus a number of months later show that Jesus was establishing a new understanding for us in relation to death. Sleep is not a metaphor for death as commonly believed by theologians. Sleep, as a result of what happened on Golgotha, has instead become a metaphor for conscious **rest**. In Christ. That is the message of the awakening

of the daughter of Jairus.

After Golgotha, treating “sleep” merely as a euphemism or metaphor for “death” leads to contradictory language. It would mean that when Jesus said “she is not dead”, He actually meant to say that “she was dead,” since being asleep as a metaphor for death meant *being dead*. Instead, Jesus’ use of “sleep” (rest) points to a profound spiritual reality that will be new to Christianity as a result of Golgotha. I believe that is what Jesus was saying when He said to the converted criminal: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Paradise is the new reality in Christ. For the lives of believers to be *hidden* with Christ in God is the beginning of Paradise. On Golgotha, Jesus would destroy death’s power and finality for believers. Their lives would now be in Him. As they were at the foundation of the world. He pointed *forward* to this victory by raising Jairus’ daughter as well as Lazarus. He did this prior to Golgotha because His public, post-resurrection ministry on earth would end with Golgotha. These two awakenings, it is important to note, are accompanied by revealing *dialogues*.

The unmistakable declaration that both were “asleep” rather than “dead” was meant to implant a new confessional understanding of death before Christ’s own death at Golgotha. Jesus’ actions underscore that, **in Him**, death for believers has lost its power; their lives are now hidden in Him. The early church, led by the apostles, especially Paul, would embrace this truth (1 Thess. 4:15a). Sadly, the modern church often neglects this great reality realized on Golgotha. Why? Because the majority of exegetes are committed to the view that *sleep* is a metaphor for *death*. And that when Christians die, they go to heaven to continue their earthly lives there. It is as if Christ’s return had already taken place. That being the case, why did Jesus bother with the dialogue accompanying the two awakenings? To what end?

It is revealing to note that both the NIV and the ESV study Bibles neglect to associate Jesus’ discussions about the awakening of the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8:52) and of Lazarus (John 11:11) in the context of *sleep* as rest. Sleep as rest is the reference Paul is making to these two awakenings in 1 Thessalonians 4:15. Why then are the discussions about the awakenings of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus, which take place prior to Golgotha, not recognized by the NIV and ESV study Bibles as the “word” Paul says he received from the Lord? (1 Thess. 4:15a). How would they account for this “elaborate” discussion on Jesus’ part about sleep in relation to the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus? Why is He laughed to scorn?

6.5 A Summary to this Point:

- About 10 months before Jesus dies on Golgotha, He declares the following about the daughter of Jairus:

“And all were weeping and mourning for her, but He said, ‘Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping (Gr. *katheudei*)” (Luke 8:52). Yes, Jesus said without reservation that the daughter of Jairus **was not dead**. And He in fact also said in what state she was: Asleep! Inactive. Alive **in Him** (Col. 3:3-4).

- Then, shortly before Jesus’ death on Golgotha, He said:

“Our friend Lazarus *has fallen asleep* (Gr. *kekoimētai*) but I am going to awaken him” (John 11:11). Jesus actually waited for Lazarus to die before He returned to Bethany. The reality of sleep as rest must be acknowledged as the *normative* component of the discussion between Jesus and His disciples: Lazarus has fallen asleep and I am going to wake him up: that is **normative**. It is the disciples, when they realize Jesus was not referring to natural sleep, who then can only “grasp” Lazarus to be dead. But that is not the norm Jesus is establishing in His dealings with Lazarus. There is a new norm coming: Golgotha!

- At the moment of Jesus’ death, the curtain in the temple is torn.
- *At the moment* (note the timing) of Jesus’ own death on Golgotha, God the Father awakens many believers (saints) *who have fallen asleep* (Gr. root *koimaomai*) (Matt. 27:51-53).

So here we have indisputable references to believers whose death is described, **post**-Golgotha (Matt. 27:51-53), as having fallen asleep by God the Father Himself.

7. Hidden with Christ–The Theology of Colossians 3

7.1 The Testimony of Colossians 3:1-4

In Colossians 3:1-4 we read:

If then you have been raised with Christ [in Him, you were there], seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. [Why?] ³ For you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God [a reality to which the believer is conscious]. ⁴ When Christ who is your life, appears [Christ has been the believer’s life for some 2,000 years now], then you also will appear with him in glory.

7.2 Raised with Christ: The Heavenly Orientation of the Believer

The first two verses of chapter 3 are of paramount importance to help us understand verses 3 and 4 correctly. The words: “Since then you have been raised with Christ...” communicate an important reality. These words call attention to the reality of the Christian’s life as this life is a participation in the life of Christ. Therefore, the **in Him** references throughout the New Testament. Here we have an indirect reference to the “**in Him**” and “**in Christ**” phrases found in Colossians 1. These phrases are of tremendous significance. For instance, the believer is told that he or she existed “**in Christ**” from before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). That is a “heavenly” reality. In Colossians 1:16-17 we read:

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

This revelation is staggering. Note that Christ is *before all things*. That is, before the existence of the *entire* creation. **In Him** *all things* hold together. Like oxygen and hydrogen hang together to form water. And it does so by God’s will. He is *before* all things, and **in Him** all things hold together as Creator. Hebrews 11:3(b) informs the reader “...that what is seen is not made out of what was visible.” Because “*all* that which came to be” was issued *out of Him*, by the Word, as the origin of all things. All that exists is truly original. That confession pretty well puts the skids to the nonsense advocated by theistic evolution.

7.3 Hidden with Christ in God: A Present but Concealed Reality

The “in Him” and “in Christ” phrases and all that those phrases relate to cannot be grasped logically. They can only be confessed and believed.

And so verse 1 and verse 2 of the third chapter of the letter to the Colossians call attention to the reality that the believer has been raised with Christ even as he died with Christ. And because we died and are raised with Christ, the believer is encouraged to take note of the relationship between heaven where Christ is seated and the earth where the believer lives his life. Both are part of creation but two realities subject to different laws. The opening verses of Colossians 3 then encourage the believer to set his eyes on the things above, that is, on heaven where Christ is in Whom all things exist. And *not* on earthly things. Scripture here pictures a clear relationship between heaven and earth. We are back in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The emphasis of the text is to call attention to the believer's position **in Christ** through Whom we can do all things. The believer died and is raised with Christ in heaven, even as the believer is admonished not to set his mind on earthly things.

Why should the believer set his mind on things above where Christ is rather than on earthly things?

Because he is about to learn what has happened to him as a result of Golgotha. A great transformation took place. The believer (male and female) is told that **he died**. The context suggests that the believer died two deaths: the death to sin in the first instance (v. 3) and eventually the death to life on earth (v. 4). Verse 3 clearly states: "For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." So we die to sin *in Christ* and eventually we die to life on this earth. For 2,000 years already. While God gathers the elect. God's sense of history. We thereby put off our sinful flesh. Then follows the reality Jesus gave expression to in the case of the daughter of Jairus when He said: **"She is not dead..."** in the sense of not being dead as revealed in Colossians 3:3, "For you (she) died." That reality is not in question. Both to sin and to life on earth. "And your (her) life is now hidden with Christ in God." The daughter of Jairus died and yet she is alive. In Christ. Jesus says so. According to Colossians 3:3, her life is *hidden* with Christ in God while she was no longer active on earth.

7.4 The Daughter of Jairus: A Foretaste of Resurrection Life

Jesus was revealing by His awakening of the daughter of Jairus what would happen as a result of Golgotha. The lives of all those believers who *fall asleep in Christ* would be hidden with Christ in God. Being hidden with Christ in God I believe is referred to in the New Testament after Golgotha as "falling asleep in Christ." The reason I believe our lives

at physical death are *hidden* with Christ in God is because we have lost the use of our bodies. Our bodies are in the grave (2 Cor. 5:1) and our spirit returned to be with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Nevertheless, Scripture continues to use the language that **you** died, and **you** went to be with Christ, and **you** are in the grave. Scripture relates to us transcendently in terms of our humanity. And so the life we receive when we die is *hidden*. We are not, as is believed by some, sitting around in heaven having discussions with Paul and others. Yes, there are believers who go to heaven as active participants as revealed in Scripture but that is another matter. Again, because it is a reality we can only come to terms with if we as believers set our hearts (spirit) on (real) things above. And then only as revealed in Scripture. In Christ all things are possible. The reality as described in Colossians 3 takes place *in Christ*. And so again, Jesus could say *without* the use of metaphors and euphemisms that the daughter of Jairus **was not dead**. He, Jesus, is her life. This is an instance of the **in Him** teaching so crucial to understanding the New Testament. While everyone thought on the basis of our earthly reality that the daughter of Jairus was dead, her life was in truth *hidden* with Christ in God as part of the heavenly reality. Jesus was and is her life. Because He was going to Golgotha. Yes, and He was this even from before the foundation of the world. **IN HIM**. That presence in Christ is as *real* as the nose on your face. A world turned upside down in the Garden of Eden is about to be turned right side up on Golgotha. Jesus is our life. He **is** the resurrection. And so Jesus as the girl's life went into the room where the 12 year old girl was *sleeping* (resting) **in Christ** and He woke her up. A heavenly reality! Believe! Confess! Do not trivialize Golgotha by making it about going to heaven in the company of millions of others whose lives are not hidden. Why not? Because her life, we are told, was in Truth *hidden in Christ* and He gave that life back, as He will do to all of us at the resurrection, but then in all its fullness with spiritual bodies when we once again *appear*.

7.5 Lazarus and the Pre-Golgotha Witness of Glory

As He did again shortly before His own death with Lazarus. He is **the Christ!** The Alpha and the Omega. And He will do so with you and me. And millions of believers on the last day. “In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52)¹³. And so the teaching and meanings of the New Testament concerning “falling asleep in Christ” finds power-

13. This in and of itself is sufficient to refute the ignorant assertions of theistic evolutionists that God requires eons and eons to create.

ful manifestation in the demonstrable awakenings of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus. Christ provided the church with an eye-witness account of what will happen on His return because of Golgotha. We are given two witnesses to whom life actually returned, as it will to all believers, the first of those at the *very moment* of Christ's death on Golgotha (Matt. 27:51).

7.6 When Christ Appears: The Unveiling of the Hidden Life

Colossians 3:4 then shares the following wonderful news with all those who look forward to "falling asleep in Christ":

"When Christ, **who is your life** [life in Him], appears [second coming] then you also will appear with Him in glory."

We will *appear*. But during the interim (already in play for 2,000 years) all believers will be alive in Christ. Our lives at Christ's appearance will no longer remain *hidden*. We will, by then, have received our bodies back. Our spiritual bodies. And again become visible. Our spiritual, glorified bodies. Just as Scripture says. And as manifested by Jesus at the lake as He ate fish with His disciples.

7.7 The Interim State: Rest, Fellowship, and Expectation

Praise the LORD God Almighty, for when we die we will not be dead. John Christian, my grandson, is alive **in Christ**. Christ can do anything. But we should confess what Scripture teaches. Our lives, like those of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus, during the interim will be hidden with Christ in God until the day of Jesus' second appearance and the return of our bodies. And somehow, wonder of wonders, during that interim, we will experience conscious fellowship with Jesus. A life according to Paul that is better by far.

Clearly, then, in the New Testament, sleep is not a metaphor for death but for rest and conscious fellowship with Jesus.

8. "IN HIM" and "IN CHRIST"

8.1 The Lazarus Event: More Than an Appearance of Death

There are many ways to attempt to picture this reality but to me one way is to picture the tomb of Lazarus. The body of Lazarus has reached a state of decay where one of his sisters cautions Jesus that Lazarus has begun to smell. It's been four days. And in Palestine

it is hot. What a scenario: Lazarus in his tomb, Jesus standing in front of that tomb, and a sister speaking words of caution to the Creator. This is not a fable. There is more than one reality in play here. In one respect **death** dominates this scene. But that is only an appearance. To see beyond appearances, it is essential to understand what the Scriptures have to say about the phrase: **in Christ**.

We know from the text of John 11:11 that Jesus has declared Lazarus to be asleep in spite of appearances and Martha's concern. In a somewhat different context, what Jesus emphatically declared earlier to be true about the daughter of Jairus, He now says is also true about Lazarus: LAZARUS IS NOT DEAD! HE IS ASLEEP! How are we to understand what Jesus is teaching?

8.2 The Sleep of Believers: Not a Euphemism for Death

How can Jesus possibly maintain that what He is saying about the daughter of Jairus as well as Lazarus (and you and me as believers) corresponds to the truth? How can He possibly maintain in the presence of the lifeless corpse of the daughter of Jairus and the odorous corpse of Lazarus that these two believers **ARE NOT DEAD**? Especially when that declaration by Jesus is *absolute* in its expression. That is, the reality that the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus, in spite of *appearances*, are not dead is the perfect and complete and entire and whole and comprehensive truth. Is it not offensive for interpreters to attempt to come to Jesus' "assistance" in interpreting the truth of His words and make them credible? And to do this by watering down those words to the point of contradiction? And they do so indeed by arguing that "sleep" is actually a metaphor or euphemism for death. So *they* actually have Jesus saying that Jairus' daughter and Lazarus *are* dead. And the reason such "word play" is not only not necessary but offensive is because Jesus **is** the truth, **is** the life, and **is** the way. When Jesus declares that these two people are not dead but asleep, all that remains for the interpreter to do is ask: How are we to understand the meaning of what Jesus is declaring? Instead, they contradict what He is saying. They have Jesus saying: "She is not dead, she is dead (i.e., asleep)" since sleep is a metaphor for death. The whole point of Jesus saying what He is saying is that He already knew that she had died, that was not an issue, but having died, He now declared that she is NOT dead! By saying that "she is not dead, she is dead (i.e., asleep)", are we not laughing Jesus to scorn, like many commentators and theologians have?

8.3 The Absolute Truthfulness of Christ's Words

One of the most misunderstood and least appreciated *teachings* of Scripture is contained in the biblical meaning of the phrase **IN HIM**.¹⁴

When Jesus declares without reservation or condition that the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus *who have died* are **not dead**, then He is doing this as the Creator and Messiah and Redeemer in Whom *all of reality* finds its origin, continued existence, and meaning. The *very words* spoken are of necessity true because the truth of all reality resides *in Him*. To demonstrate that reality, Jesus would have to be able to make the **apparent** death of these two individuals of no effect. And in order to make their apparent deaths of no effect, He would have to make them righteous in His Father's sight. Death is the consequence of sin. And they are sinners. And in order to achieve a reality of non-death, the sins of these two believers would have to be ransomed. Paid in full. Christ would have to possess the power *in Himself* to nullify sin and thereby nullify death. And *then* declare that these two believers are not dead. And that is the message Jesus wishes to convey in respect to the status of these two individuals.

8.4 Golgotha and the Restoration of Fellowship

The reason Jesus awakened Jairus' daughter and Lazarus from what the New Testament will henceforth portray as *sleep* (rest), is because of what He will accomplish on Golgotha on behalf of all believers. Their sins will be wiped out. Jesus Christ is going to again establish the reality the first Adam so flippantly threw away in the Garden of Eden. Never! No, never trivialize what transpired on Golgotha. Jesus Christ paid for the sin of the world with His life. The sin committed from the inception of creation and the sin committed in the 2,000 years since Golgotha, and the sin committed until the end of time. Yes, from namely that mountain of sin, Jesus Christ *regained* Paradise. What the first Adam *lost* in Eden: perfect fellowship between God the Father and believing mankind. Christ achieved this world-altering transformation of reality for all those who believe **in Him** because they died **in Him**. **In** His Person! **On** the cross. And on Easter morning they rose with Him.

Christ became the second Adam in order to destroy the work of the devil. And the

14. The fuller significance of this phrase is explored in detail in Andree Troost, *What is Reformational Philosophy?* (Jordan Station, ON.: Paideia Press, 2020); Andree Troost, *The Philosophy of the Science of Faith* (Jordan Station, ON.: Paideia Press, 2025).

work of the devil was to alienate man from God, an alienation which would end in death. To achieve reconciliation and grant believers eternal life, Christ had to die on Golgotha. Man's sin had to be ransomed. A righteous God demanded no less. We could not pay that price. Not even Abraham, the father of believers. No one. Except God Himself in Jesus Christ. So God came to earth in the Person of Jesus Christ. And as both God and Man, Jesus would pay the price. All of it. To the last penny.

The result of that sacrifice to be made by Jesus with His own life enabled Him to say about the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus that **they are not dead**. I will soon ransom their lives. **They are alive in Me**. What I am saying and doing, I am saying and doing in anticipation of the world-altering transformation which will take place on Golgotha.

8.5 Colossians 3 and the Reality of Hidden Life

This New Testament reality of the victory of life over death can hardly be expressed more compellingly than it is in Colossians 3:3-4. There we read the victorious and liberating word that came to Paul:

For you [daughter of Jairus and you Lazarus and all those to follow who are children of the first Adam] **died** [that reality is not in doubt. Gen. 2:17, “for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die” daughter of Jairus and Lazarus. But are they dead?] **and your life is now hidden with Christ in God** [here we have the big “**with Him**” and the big “**in Him**”].

But there is more. Much more.

When Christ who is your life [when Jesus Christ declares that He is your life, then you are not dead even though you have died. Yes, that is the meaning of Golgotha. That is the reality Jesus conveyed in the awakening of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus. They are not dead! I, Jesus Christ, am their life.] **appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.**

There is no need to bring metaphors and euphemisms to bear upon the text to make it comprehensible. The daughter of Jairus? She is not dead. She is asleep in Christ. And Lazarus? I am going to wake him. He is not dead either. Both have **life in Me**.

We can achieve nothing apart from Christ. Not in the *beginning* and not *now*. Christ **in us**. Christ became *our* righteousness on Golgotha. By faith **in Him** we have been justified. **In Him** the curtain of separation came down in the temple. **In Him** we may once again live in perfect harmony with the Father.

In Him all things were created. The Alpha and the Omega. The complete alphabet of God's creation. God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell **in Him**. In Him, Satan was defeated. In Him, God the Father's honor was restored. In Him **life** is freely granted to those who confess faith in Him.

8.6 Falling Asleep in Christ: The Conscious State of Rest

The mind-boggling message of the awakening of Jairus' daughter and Lazarus prior to Golgotha is that **in Him**, and through **His** presence on Golgotha, the landscape of the entire cosmos has changed. In Him those who die (fall asleep) are given eternal life. Yes, at the moment of their death. That incredible transformation is revealed to the believer in Colossians 3:4. We are told to set our minds on things above (Col. 3:1-2) (transcendent) and not on earthly things (immanence). And then follows the reality gifted to believers on Golgotha. "For you died [both to sin and at one point to our earthly lives], and your life is now *hidden with Christ* in God." That is the reality Christ's death on Golgotha would achieve. And this is the reality Christ was referring to when He said about Jairus' daughter and Lazarus that they are not dead. And Jesus pointed to the New Testament reality where those who died in the Lord would henceforth be declared to have fallen asleep. A conscious state of rest. Which is *one* of the meanings of what Scripture means when it declares that believers fall asleep. And to manifest the truthfulness and the power of those words, Jesus actually awakened both.

Yes, **in Him** all believers now possess eternal life. Their death is a transition to falling asleep (resting) in Christ. Awaiting the resurrection.

In Him believers cross over from death to life. That will soon be seen *as the message* of the incredible dialogues accompanying the awakenings of Jairus' daughter and Lazarus. For "**in Him** we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17:28). The awakenings are a preview of what will transpire on Golgotha **in Him**!

9. Other Passages on "Falling Asleep"

Interestingly, the very next chronological reference to death in terms of having *fallen*



asleep (in Matt. 27:51-53) takes place in reference to Jesus Himself as the second Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15:20 we read: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those *who have fallen asleep* (Gr. *kekoimēmenōn*).” The Bible is nothing if not consistent.

And then, not much later, Stephen is stoned to death because of his testimony respecting Jesus. And the believer is told he falls asleep as well. In Acts 7:59-60 we read:

⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, *he fell asleep* [Gr. *ekoimēthē*].

Note the connection between “receive my spirit” and “falling asleep.”

That is, he went to be with Christ who is his life (Col. 3:3-4). To **rest** in Christ’s glorious presence until the day of resurrection.¹⁵

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15. In Stephen’s case that for *us* is now more than 2,000 years ago. But we have to consider that Stephen’s life being *hidden* with Christ in God for 2,000 years should not be thought of in terms of 24-hour days or as 2,000 years for Stephen. He is no longer

And there are yet more New Testament references to “falling asleep in Christ” that follow. Can we, in the face of all these references, credibly argue that falling asleep has not been established as an important theme in the New Testament? Can we ignore or misrepresent what these references clearly reveal?

9.1 More Sleep References in the New Testament

We gradually come to realize that “falling asleep in Christ” is an event that occurs *only as a result* of what Christ accomplished on Golgotha where the *power* of death and the *consequence* of our sin were destroyed. And as a result of which Satan was thrown out of heaven at the moment Christ is seated at God’s right hand. Satan lost his God-given right to accuse the elect *in Christ’s redeeming presence*. It should therefore not be surprising that in such a context a reference to believers as having “fallen asleep” (entered their rest) is *first made* by God the Father at the *very moment* of Jesus’ death. Because the two are inseparably related. In Matthew 27:50-52 we read:

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice [**TETELESTAI – IT IS FILLED!**], He gave up His spirit. ⁵¹ *And behold* [the NIV “*at that very moment*”], the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split [opening the tombs]. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep [Gr. *kekoimēmenōn*] were raised [awakened]....

Amazing. This is God the Father responding to Jesus’ sacrifice.

Note well: This reference to this “*world-altering, cosmic redemptive*” event takes place at the very moment that Jesus died. The event in the temple should be viewed as God the Father restoring fellowship between Himself and believers. And the restoration and giving of new life is indicative of Satan’s loss of power over death. The curtain is gone. The death sentence for approaching the Father in a sinful state has been abolished. Because of Golgotha, entering into God’s presence no longer results in death. We may now approach the Father in Jesus’ name. Many believers who had fallen asleep and whose lives were *hidden* now *appear*. Because Christ has appeared on Golgotha. Fellowship with the Father restored. The very heart and meaning of man as image bearer. Satan’s destructive

subject to earthbound time. Time in Christ is part of the *Mysterium Tremendum*.

work has been undone. As we will see later, this reality does create problems of interpretation for premillennialists.

10. Understanding What Happens When a Believer Dies

The greatest difficulty, I believe, in understanding what happens to a believer at death is the undeniable *return* to dust of the body and the return of man’s breath, his spirit, to God.

Many theologians of a scholastic (nature/grace) bent of mind view man as consisting of two independent substances: a body and a soul. But that is not how Scripture sees it. We will discuss that issue in more depth in the next paper, What Did Jesus Accomplish on Golgotha?.

Anything said on this subject, especially in light of what the Greeks have done with the separation of body and soul in an absolute sense of two substances tends to influence the Christian understanding which is then viewed dualistically. Even when it isn’t. True as the reality of the duality of body and soul may be, Scripture does not agree with the ancient Greek view articulated by Socrates and Plato. This view has been uncritically adopted by some Christians. *Even today some Christians view the relationship between body and soul dualistically.* As evidence, acquire a copy of Louis Markos’ recent book *From Plato to Christ: How Platonic Thought Shaped the Christian Faith* (IVP Academic), a view defended positively. The Greeks idolized man’s spirit which they considered to be immortal (in a speculative philosophical sense), while trivializing and denying any possible importance of the body. Scripture, on the other hand, acknowledges that man has a body and soul but always views man as a *whole*, as a *unity* (Gen. 2:7).

10.1 Socrates’ Remarkable Speech on Death

Consider the following **excerpt** from Socrates’ final speech prior to his death, revealing what he understood to be the relationship between the earth and the world of ideas (his idea of heaven) as well as between body and soul. This dualistic Greek view expressed by Socrates has much in common with *subsequent* views articulated by Christians who substituted the Greek “world of ideas” with heaven. Here follows Socrates’ swansong as he willingly and joyfully embraces death:

“Let us reflect in another way,” declares Socrates, “and we shall see that there is great reason to hope that death is a good; for one of two things—either death is a state

of nothingness and utter unconsciousness, or, as men say, there is a change and migration of the soul from this world to another.¹⁶ Now if you suppose that there is no consciousness, but a sleep like the sleep of him who is undisturbed even by dreams, death will be an unspeakable gain... Now if death be of such a nature, I say that to die is gain; for eternity is then only a single night. But if death is the journey to another place [the place in which the soul originally resided], and there, as men say, all the dead abide, what good, O my friends and judges, can be greater than this? If indeed when the pilgrim arrives in the world below, he is delivered from the professors of justice in this world, and finds the true judges who are said to give judgment there... What would not a man give if he might converse with Orpheus and Musaeus and Hesiod and Homer? Nay, if this be true, let me die again and again. I myself, too, shall have a wonderful interest in there meeting and conversing with Palamedes, and Ajax the son of Telamon, and any other ancient hero who has suffered death through an unjust judgment; and there will be no small pleasure, as I think, in comparing my own sufferings with theirs. Above all, I shall then be able to continue my search into true and false knowledge; as in this world, so also in the next; and I shall find out who is wise, and who pretends to be wise, and is not. What would not a man give, O judges, to be able to examine the leader of the great Trojan expedition; or Odysseus or Sisyphus, or numberless others, men and women too! What infinite delight would there be in conversing with them and asking them questions! In another world they do not put a man to death for asking questions: assuredly not. For besides being happier than we are, they will be immortal, if what is said is true.”¹⁷

So spoke Socrates as he was about to die. The views of Socrates in some respects are identical to a number of mistaken views adhered to by some Christians. Socrates also believes that in this spiritual world he will meet famous people. What would a man not give, he says, to converse with those people.

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16. This “other” world is later described by Socrates’ student, Plato, as the world of ideas. Plato taught that the soul lived in this perfect world experiencing *everything* as a perfect prototype until it was imprisoned by the body – how? We are not told.
17. Socrates, “Socrates’ Final Speech: Choosing Death Before Dishonor”, *World Future Fund*. Accessed Jan. 8, 2024, <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/reports/socrates/socrates.html/>.

Although the Scriptures *distinguish* between body and soul, they do not treat them as self-sufficient entities as do the Greeks. Unlike the Greek point of view, the Scriptures significantly and invariably speak of man as a *whole* person. And the Scriptures have a high view of the body (Ps. 139). Man is certainly *distinguishable* as body *and* soul (Gen. 2:7). But neither body nor soul *alone* constitutes a human being created in God’s image. Scripture rejects this dualistic view of the Greeks that puts the body in conflict with the soul. And declares that the soul is immortal. Scripture views man as an integral whole in respect to which the body serves as the wondrously engineered and indispensable, unified and marvelous (Ps. 139) cloak (*functiemantel*, Vollenhoven) which is there to enable man to function in a three-dimensional world.

10.2 Viewing Created Reality through “Heavenly Eyes”

Our sometimes simplistic attitude towards heaven is to equate the realities of heaven and earth as if we can simply go to live in heaven as we now live on earth. At least that is what we are told. Elijah ascended *bodily* to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). The archangel Michael disputed with Satan over the *body* of Moses (Jude 9). Probably prior to and in anticipation of the appearance of Moses along with Elijah and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. But the Transfiguration is a unique event.

Aren’t we told that Christians go to heaven when they die? And don’t they continue their existence in heaven in much the same way that they existed on earth? That is certainly a common belief. One of the significant differences between heaven and earth is our physicality and our experience of *time*. We live in a world of yesterdays, today, and tomorrows. The sun rises and the sun sets. God in Jesus Christ and the angels are not subject to time or physicality. They are spiritual, while we will not receive our spiritual bodies until the resurrection. In that respect, God has chosen to reveal very little. God in Jesus Christ views reality from beginning to end in one glance. All of created reality existed in Christ from before the foundation of the world (Col. 1). Our lives are hidden in Christ from before the foundations of the earth (Eph. 4:1). Heaven is a *higher world order* (non-three dimensional) from where Christ reigns and in Whom our lives are hidden when we fall asleep (rest) in Christ. But for our lives to be *hidden* in Christ does not mean that we are now living in heaven as we lived on earth.

And remember: Christ is omnipotent and omniscient. The laws of creation are an *expression* of His will (Rev. 4:11) but Christ Himself *is not subject* to those laws. He can walk on water. Turn water into wine. The laws of creation are His *servants*. They obey His command. Christ *numbers* the hairs on our head (that is, states their number). He does not *count* them. Counting is an activity subject to mathematical laws created by Christ. You and I, we count. We are human. We cannot just declare what the number of hairs on our heads actually is. Christ can. Christ is not *subject* (not a servant) to the laws of creation, He called them into being. We are subject. And we should not willy-nilly draw parallels between the functioning of earth and heaven as if the two are one and the same. When we do so we are out of our depth. And we do so all the time.

It is *important* to attempt to view created reality through eyes informed by what is revealed about Christ as Creator. Examine a few texts describing how the Bible speaks about time:

1 Peter 1:20 – “[Christ] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest [in the flesh] in the last times for the sake of you.”

Yes, He became the second Adam. Took on our flesh. But remained God. Christ has existed forever.

Ephesians 1:4 – “even as [Christ] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love...”

A description of reality which entered history on Golgotha.

Matthew 25:34 – “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you *from the foundation of the world.*”

The kingdom referred to by the converted criminal on the cross.

There is nothing in all of creation that Christ was not aware of from before the beginning of time.

Perhaps one of the best ways to “understand” what is meant by the expression **IN HIM** is to reflect on John 15:1-2, 4-5 where Jesus teaches His disciples the meaning of **IN HIM** this way:

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... ⁴ *Abide in me, and I in you.* As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, **for apart from me you can do nothing**” (emphasis added).

See how incredibly important our **IN HIM** relationship is to Christ? “Nothing!” says Jesus. “Separated from the vine, you branches can do nothing.”

All of created reality from before the foundation of the world functioned in obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Created reality has its origin and being **IN HIM**. You and I included. The two realities known as heaven and earth “meet” in Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all. And we meet **in Him**. “In Him” believers can go where He goes and exist where He exists. He is the Vine and we are the branches. And I have never met a branch which could exist apart from its Vine. At the very moment of separation the branch is dead. Based on this truth Jesus could say about the daughter of Jairus: **SHE IS NOT DEAD!** Christ could do so because **He is her life**. Her existence is rooted **IN HIM**.

11. A Strong Case

To make as compelling a case about the thematic nature of “falling asleep in Christ” as possible, we will now discuss those textual references to “falling asleep” in the New Testament that up to this point have not been discussed in this paper.

Here follow additional New Testament passages (ESV) that serve to establish what I believe to be the **theme** of “falling asleep” in Christ in the New Testament:

Acts 13:36 – “For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep (*ekoimēthē*) and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption...”

Noteworthy is that in spite of the revelation that David saw corruption, the Greek word for sleep is used here in Acts. Is that because after Golgotha, Old Testament believ-

ers are now also said to be asleep in Christ in the New Testament sense? I believe it is.

1 Corinthians 7:39 – “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies (*koimēthē*, “falls asleep”), she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”

Note: Both the NIV and ESV study Bibles translate the Greek word for “sleep” in the above passage as “death.” Such a translation is unwarranted by context. It reveals the translator’s bias. The translator is committed to the view that sleep is a metaphor for death. What has happened to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*? Here, all sense of the Bible’s meaning has been lost. The translator’s prejudice prevails.

1 Corinthians 11:30 – “That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (Gr. *koimōntai*, ‘fall asleep,’ not ‘died’).”

Here again the Greek word for sleep is translated as died or death. No attempt is made by the translator to understand the meaning of “sleep” in its post-Golgotha context. The translator succeeds in saying the opposite of what the text meant to say.

This particular text is of special interest to the reader because, in spite of having abused the Lord’s Supper to the point where these believers “died” as a result of their abuse, nevertheless, the reader is informed by Scripture that these Christians are still said to have “fallen asleep in Christ” *according to the Greek*. That is to say, they are said to have “fallen asleep” as believers saved by the blood of Jesus. Only those saved by Christ are ever declared to have “fallen asleep.” The ESV therefore fails to communicate this reality of *being saved* by translating *koimōntai* as died rather than as having fallen asleep (in Christ). Thereby leaving their eternal fate of these sinners *unknown*. Yet Scripture, by using the Greek word *koimōntai* in fact declares that fellow believers will see them in the new heaven and earth. This is an unmistakable example of how seriously misleading it is to translate sleep as a metaphor for death.

1 Corinthians 15:6 – “Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep (Gr. *ekoimēthēsan*).”

This text records a post-Golgotha event. Believers are no longer referred to in Old Testament terms as those “who sleep in the dust of the earth” (Dan. 12:2). Believers who exit this earth are now said to have fallen asleep in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:18 – “Then those also who have fallen asleep (*koimēthentes*) **in Christ** have perished.”

This text firmly establishes that those who fall asleep, fall asleep **in Christ**.

1 Corinthians 15:51 – “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep (Gr. *koimēthēsometha*), but we shall all be changed....” [at the time of the resurrection].

In this text, Paul is referring to those believers who are still alive on earth when Christ returns. *They* will not fall asleep, that is, rest.

2 Peter 3:4 – “They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep (Gr. *ekoimēthēsan*), all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

In this context, Peter once again refers to Old Testament believers as those who fell asleep with the Greek word for falling asleep in Christ.

In 2 Peter, Christ’s conquest on Golgotha is ascribed to Old Testament believers who looked forward to it. Are they now not also asleep in Christ? I don’t believe I personally will live long enough to do the necessary research.

As an interesting aside, do those who are critical of Christ’s “delay” not realize, like us, that if Christ had returned prior to *their* birth they would not have been included as members of the kingdom of God? If Christ had returned in 1942, I would not have been born (I was born in 1943). And I would not exist. It was God’s wonderful, historical design that millions upon millions *would be saved* **historically** over a period of what up until now has been 2,000 years. God knows what He is doing. Don’t be too quick to question His judgment.

Ephesians 5:14 – “for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead (Gr. *katheudōn*), and Christ will shine on you.”

The text should say “...arise from your sleep” because in Ephesians 5:14, the Greek New Testament word for falling asleep is now used.

Yes, the English word for *katheudōn* is sleep, not death. Translators once again mis-translate the word for sleep as death. And thereby the power of what Christ accomplished on Golgotha is trivialized.

In the New Testament, the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus are **not dead**. Jesus has emphatically declared that they are asleep in Him. Is it not time to abandon the mistaken belief that sleep is a metaphor for death?

12. Conclusion

Big Question: Is the subject matter of “falling asleep in Christ” worthy of a detailed study?

I am not a theologian. I do not know any Greek or Hebrew. But I *can* read. And I know people who do know Greek. I am almost 83 years old. The opportunity on my part for *detailed* study is past. The revelation of Scripture that sleep (Gr. root *koimao*) is a metaphor for **rest** (rather than death) is worthy, I believe, of detailed study and research. As is much else of what I have suggested in this paper and the next. I believe it is a suitable topic for a young biblical scholar who is searching for subject material on the basis of which to write a doctoral dissertation. I **do** believe that Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, namely, “According to the Lord’s own word...” is in reference to the awakening of the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus as teaching lessons that reveal what Jesus will accomplish on Golgotha. I also believe that all references to New Testament discussions about falling asleep have nothing in common with “soul-sleep” and any discussion to “falling asleep” conducted in that context is a “straw man.” The many New Testament references to “falling asleep in Christ” constitute an obvious New Testament theme. Why else are they there? Because sleep is a metaphor for death? Brazen nonsense.

12.1 *Why So Preoccupied with Sleep?*

Not that long ago a friend asked me why I was so preoccupied with the New Testament phrase: “falling asleep in Christ”? “Is it really that important,” he asked, “to learn the details of what happens when the Christian dies (falls asleep in Christ)?” That question gave me pause for thought. Does it really matter? But then is that what my inquiry is all about? Trying to learn the details of what happens when the Christian dies?

Truth be told, my answer would be: “No! I am not all that curious about what hap-

pens to me when I die.” The Bible is very reserved about answering that question. I know from Paul’s comments on the subject that “falling asleep in Christ” will be an experience beyond comparison. There is nothing else with which to compare my meeting with Jesus Christ. Nothing. So why concern myself with the details? I will surely find out what it will be like to be with Christ when it actually happens. And I agree. That should be enough. I am willing to curb my curiosity until the time of the actual event.

However, there is a bigger question in play. A *much bigger* question. And that is the question of what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha. If we give the wrong answer to what happens when we fall asleep, there is a strong possibility we will also give the wrong answer to what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha.

In addition to writing the story of my life in this autobiography, I am concluding the book with a special eye to the interests and welfare of my grandchildren. The paper I passionately want to leave behind for them is entitled:

WHAT DID JESUS ACCOMPLISH ON GOLGOTHA?

To answer that question, we must begin by correcting a common misconception: we cannot simply say that when we die, we go to live in heaven. That simply will not do. It is not biblical. And here is why:

In the early 1980s when *Adoration URC* had not yet been formed, my family attended church at *Trinity CRC* in St. Catharines. During the early part of the 1980s a guest professor from one of the Reformed seminaries preached an Easter sermon on Luke 23:43 – “Verily I say to you, Today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

After the service during “coffee time,” I and others had an opportunity to discuss the sermon with the professor who delivered it. It was a lively discussion giving rise to deeply felt convictions. One of the main items under discussion was whether or not it was exegetically responsible to equate Paradise and heaven. And then to conclude that, when Jesus told the criminal he would be with Jesus in Paradise on Good Friday, He actually meant they would live an earth-like life in heaven. After all, Ascension Day did not take place until forty days after Jesus’ resurrection. And that ascension had incredible consequences.

One striking thing about the sermon was that it barely touched on the *criminal’s* contribution to what Jesus meant in reference to Paradise. Is it not the “Kingdom of God” to

which the criminal referred, which is synonymous to Paradise? After all, Jesus' words in the first instance were directed at the criminal. The criminal was told that this very day he would be with Jesus in Paradise. But now what does that mean? That is what the final paper is all about.

The *key* to understanding Christ's accomplishment on Golgotha is the *dialogue* on the cross. This dialogue was "initiated" by the criminal. And it is important to realize that this dialogue was made possible by God the Father and that God the Holy Spirit served as the criminal's teacher. As He was with Peter when Peter said that Jesus was the Son of God. The *conventional* interpretation that this short but crucial dialogue on the cross is believed to be riveted on is that Jesus and the criminal are going to heaven on Good Friday. This view misses its meaning altogether. To understand what happened to the criminal it is important to understand the meaning of the New Testament phrase "falling asleep in Christ." Because that Good Friday the converted criminal "fell asleep in Christ."

Having read this article, the reader now hopefully has some sense of what Scripture is saying when it says that the believer falls asleep in Christ. As did the criminal.

That brings the reader to the final paper, *What Did Jesus Accomplish on Golgotha?* In that achievement, the criminal played a unique role.

APPENDIX

The Greek *Koimaomai* Passages in Biblical Order

*“Sleep as rest” and conscious
fellowship with Christ*

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Acts 13:36	³⁶ For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep (Gr. <i>ekoimēthē</i>) and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, ³⁷ but he whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Matthew 9:24	²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. ²³ And when Jesus came to the ruler’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping (Gr. <i>kath-eudei</i>).” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. ²⁶ And the report of this went through all that district.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Mark 5:39	³⁸ They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ And when he had entered, he said to them, “Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping (Gr. <i>katheudei</i>).” ⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.”

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Luke 8:52	⁵¹ And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child. ⁵² And all were weeping and mourning for her, but he said, “Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping (Gr. <i>katheudei</i>).” ⁵³ And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Matthew 27:52	⁵¹ And behold [at that moment], the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵² The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep (Gr. <i>kekoimēmenōn</i>) were raised, ⁵³ and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴ When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!”

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
John 11:11	¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them [His disciples], “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep (Gr. <i>kekoimētai</i>), 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.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 15:20	²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (Gr. <i>kekoimēmenōn</i>). ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 15:6	³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep (Gr. <i>ekoimēthēsan</i>). ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Acts 7:59-60	⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Gr. <i>ekoimēthē</i>).

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Thessalonians 4:13	¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep (Gr. <i>koimōmenōn</i>), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Passage References	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Thessalonians 4:14	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 (Gr. <i>koimēthentas</i>).

Passage References	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Thessalonians 4:15	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 (Gr. <i>koimēthentas</i>).

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Thessalonians 5:10	⁹ For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep (Gr. <i>katheudōmen</i>) we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 7:39	³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. ³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies (Gr. <i>koimēthē</i>), she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 11:30	²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (Gr. <i>koimōntai</i>). ³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. ³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 15:18	¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep (<i>koimēthentes</i>) in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
1 Corinthians 15:51	⁵⁰ I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep (Gr. <i>koimēthēsometha</i>), but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
Ephesians 5:14	¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper (Gr. <i>katheudōn</i>), and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

Passage Reference	Bible Text (ESV)
2 Peter 3:4	¹ This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, ² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, ³ knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. ⁴ They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep (Gr. <i>ekoimēthēsan</i>), all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

Comment

Do you, the reader, not agree that these many passages constitute a New Testament theme?

And would you not agree that the reference to “falling asleep” in these passages is **not** a metaphor or euphemism for death? That the Scriptures are instead communicating important insight into what Jesus accomplished on Golgotha?

Would that alone not be worthy of a dissertation?

