

Appendix III

The Conventional, Mistaken Interpretation of “Falling Asleep in Christ”

Evangelical Leaders on the Meaning of Falling Asleep

THE FOLLOWING are comments made by notable evangelical leaders on the meaning of “falling asleep” as it relates to the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus. This overview provides the reader with a snapshot of the conventional, mistaken view by many theologians that, according to them, Jesus did not actually say that the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus were not **dead**. According to these theologians, Jesus actually meant that they **were dead** but only for a little while.

Of course, Jesus said nothing of the kind. He said the daughter of Jairus was **not** dead. And He said she was asleep. **IN HIM!**

Here follows what a number of well-known theologians have written:

- **John MacArthur** writes:

“Mark and Luke tell us the ruler’s name was Jairus. And they tell us that when Jairus first came to see Jesus, his daughter was ill. Go away, for the maid is not dead but sleeps. But when Jesus says ‘She is not dead but sleeps,’ he is using a term that is frequently used in the New Testament to speak of death as a temporary state.”

— “The Significance of the Resurrection”
(Grace to You, April 19, 1987).

Note: But that is not what Jesus said. He said she was not dead. Jesus did not imply that she was *temporarily* dead.

- **R. C. Sproul** writes:

“There was no doubt among the crowd or among the family that this little girl had breathed her last. Jesus was using ‘sleeping’ as the euphemism commonly used to describe somebody who was dead.”

— Sermon: *Jairus’ Daughter*

Note: Jesus was in fact simply denying that she was dead.

Final or otherwise.

- **John Piper** writes:

“He raised this little girl from the dead. And we know that she is dead because in Mark 5:35 they say, ‘Your daughter has died.’ And when Jesus arrives to deal with this, he says, ‘Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but sleeping’ (Mark 5:39). Well, she was temporarily dead and he calls it sleeping. Why? My answer is that this is the way the body looks and acts. It is simply a description of death by a softer picture of what it actually looks like. If you have ever looked at a person who has just died, you ask, Have they died or are they just sleeping? Because they look like they are just there, like they have always looked. And they are just asleep. So I think it is a picture, it is a pictorial description in a softer way of the actual reality that they have died.”

— Sermon: *Does My Soul Sleep After Death?*

Note: The word “temporary death” never crosses Jesus’ lips. Even as a euphemism.

- **D. A. Carson** writes:

“This is not a medical judgment. It is a way that Jesus often speaks of genuine death. He says something similar in the case of Lazarus, even after Lazarus has been in the

tomb for four days. When there was already decay, he says, ‘No, he’s sleeping.’ The disciples thought that was pretty strange too. It’s one of Jesus’ [metaphorical] ways of saying, in effect, that death is not final.”

— Sermon: *Who Touched Me?*

Note: Sleep in the New Testament is **not** a metaphor for death. It is a metaphor for conscious rest **in Christ**. If “sleep” is a metaphor for death then Jesus would be saying: “She is not dead, she is dead (that is asleep).” That is nonsense.

“[Her] death is not final... they don’t understand any of this. There’s more scorn. They just laughed at him, probably the same people who were doing some of the professional wailing. Now they can laugh at him too, because it is merely professional.”

— Sermon: *Who Touched Me?*

Note: Why would Jesus’ contemporaries have laughed Jesus to scorn if Jesus had said her death was only temporary? Those present understood what Jesus meant when He said: **SHE IS NOT DEAD**. That is why they laughed the Creator of heaven and earth to scorn.

- **I. Howard Marshall** writes:

“The use of the verb ‘to sleep’ as a *euphemism* for death is common enough. Here, however, the point is the con-

trast between death and sleep; death is not final, for it is possible to be wakened from it. Thus death is reinterpreted from the point of view of God, which is different from that of men, and cannot be appreciated by them.

— *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Paternoster Press)

Note: No, Jesus did indeed deny she was dead. Last word or not. Jesus' words are a *categorical* statement: "She is not dead, she is asleep." No room for judging Jesus' words.

- **R. T. France** writes:

"Sleep as a metaphor, or euphemism, for death is a common biblical usage... the context here indicates that the girl's death is real, but temporary."

— *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary*

Note: The above, we are told, is just another way of saying that Jesus said she was **not dead**. It is not. If "sleep" is just a euphemism (nice word) for "death," then this author is saying that she is dead.

- **James A. Brooks** writes:

"The verb 'to sleep' could refer to literal sleep or, in this case, the deep sleep of a coma. In such case the child was

not dead, and the miracle consisted of bringing her out of the coma—no small feat in itself! The verb is also used metaphorically to refer to death (e.g., John 11:11–14; 1 Cor 15:51; 1 Thess 4:13–15), and that is almost certainly the meaning here.”

— *Mark, vol. 23, The New American Commentary*

Note: When Jesus declares she is **not** dead, that does not mean that she was in a coma either. You cannot explain away what Jesus actually means. And if the coma argument doesn’t stick, then it should be considered a metaphor? Sloppy exegesis.

- **Tony Evans** writes:

“Though the girl was dead from a human perspective, that was only a temporary condition. She was only [metaphorically] asleep (5:39).”

— *The Tony Evans Bible Commentary*

Note: In this context, sleep is not a metaphor for death. When Jesus says the girl is sleeping, He is saying that she is **alive in Him**. That is what it means, in part, to “fall asleep in Christ.”

- **N. T. Wright** writes:

“Sleep was a standard Jewish way of referring to death... precisely because it implied that death was not

permanent.”

— *Surprised by Hope*

Note: Sleep was a standard Jewish way of referring to death in the **Old Testament**. The point of the awakening of the daughter of Jairus is that **Golgotha** is going to change all that.

An overall comment: All the comments quoted above agree on one thing: When Jesus declares that the girl is not dead, Jesus is said to be mistaken. The above authors all agree that the girl is in fact dead. Temporarily, reversibly but nonetheless, **dead**.

None of the authors see a connection between Jesus declaring the girl is not dead and the subsequent teaching of the New Testament about “falling asleep in Christ.” And the coming event of Golgotha apparently plays no role in their exegesis.

What Study Bibles Have to Say:

As if the above quotations were not contradictory enough, consider what commentators have had to say in several Study Bibles on Mark 5:39 and Luke 8:52, “Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping” (ESV):

- *The Harper Collins Study Bible* states:

[From Mark 5:39] Partly because *sleeping* is a common

euphemism for death in the NT (e.g., Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:10), Jesus' assessment of the child's condition is ambiguous. The context, however, suggests that the girl was really dead and that Jesus' remark indicates the ease with which he will bring her back.

Note: Jesus does not speak ambiguously. Yes, according to this Study Bible, the girl really was dead. "In context," no less. The passage in Eph. 5:14 is a citation of the Old Testament where sleep is a metaphor for death, unlike the New Testament where it represents **life in Christ**. Therefore, the New Testament expression: "falling asleep in Christ." Is it believable that "falling asleep in Christ" could possibly mean "falling asleep in death"? In 1 Thess. 5:10, "sleep" is a reference to "sleep in Christ" which is a reference to life, not death.

- *The Lutheran Study Bible* states:

The girl had, in fact, died, but Jesus was about to awaken her as easily as from a natural sleep. Because of the Lord's mastery over death and the resurrection promise, the NT repeatedly speaks of death in terms of "sleeping" (Matt. 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13-15).

Note: The New Testament does not repeatedly speak of death in terms of "sleeping." The New Testament speaks in terms of the believer **not being dead**. And when believers who have died are said not to be dead like the

daughter of Jairus, then **that** is what the New Testament means when it says that such believers are “asleep in Christ.”

- *The Reformation Study Bible* states:

Mourning was normally demonstrative and included much wailing. Jesus forbids it all and says that the girl is “sleeping.” This does not mean that she has not died [true, she has died **but** is not dead] but that Jesus is prepared to wake her from death (cf. John 11:11-15).

Note: Yes, Jesus declares that the girl, though she has died, is not dead. Emphatically. So He does not have to be prepared to wake her from death. Christ is her life, that is, she is asleep (alive) **in Him**.

- *NKJV Study Bible* states:

Sleeping, a common metaphor for death, indicates in this passage that the girl’s death was not permanent.

Note: If sleeping is a common metaphor for death then when Jesus declares: “She is not dead, she is sleeping,” Jesus is in fact saying: “She is not dead, she is dead” since sleep is a metaphor for death.

Such an interpretation which is common transforms what Jesus is saying into nonsense.

- *ESV Study Bible* states:

The mocking and laughing crowd takes Jesus' statement [she is not dead] **literally** (cf. Mark 9:26), supposing that Jesus cannot accept the reality of death. The child had indeed died (see Luke 8:55), but from Jesus' viewpoint her real death is but sleep.

Note: Jesus' statement **was** meant to be taken literally. She is **not** dead! She is asleep **in Christ**. Christ is her life. Jesus' point is that she died but that she is not dead. How do the exegetes explain that sleep in the New Testament takes place **IN CHRIST**? Do they believe that Christ is the origin of death? That falling asleep **in Christ** means being **dead** in Christ?

- *The Ryrie Study Bible* states:

The mourners looked on death as irreversible, so Christ called it sleep, since (though the girl was actually dead) she would be awakened to life once again.

Note: What a complexity of contradictions. The girl was not "actually dead." Jesus actually told the mourners: **SHE IS NOT DEAD**. And that is what He means: that Christ was her life. In a few moments Jesus would walk out of her bedroom with her to amaze those who a few minutes earlier laughed Him to scorn.

Although she had died, Jesus declared she was not dead. And behold, there she stood. Next to Jesus. Yes,

that is what was going to happen as a result of Golgotha.

- *The MacArthur Study Bible* states:

Jesus was not saying that her death was a misdiagnosis. This was a prophecy that she would live again. He made a similar comment about Lazarus' death (Jn. 11:11) – and then had to explain to the disciples that he was speaking metaphorically (Jn. 11:14). Sleep is a designation for death in the NT (cf. 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:51; 1 Th. 5:10).

Note: The above is exactly what Jesus is not saying. In the New Testament, sleep is no longer a designation for death. To say that she is dead is a contradiction of what Jesus said, namely, that she is **not** dead. She is asleep **IN CHRIST**. In the New Testament that means she is alive **in Him**. For you and me as well after Golgotha.

- *NLT Study Bible* states:

Jesus emphasized the temporary nature of the girl's state. For believers, death is only temporary "sleep" (cp. John 11:11; the same term is translated as "dead/died" in Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:14-15; 5:10).

Note: Jesus' point is not that death is temporary for believers. Jesus is saying she is **not dead**. That is the point. Death after Golgotha is a transition to eternal life. In the New Testament that is described as "falling asleep in

Christ.” That is the meaning of all the passages quoted above.

An overall comment: The terms dead/died are **not** identical. Believers die but having died they are not dead. See especially Colossians 3:1-4. Those who have died on earth are asleep in Christ. Such is the teaching of Scripture as the reader will come to see from this book.

- The *NIV Study Bible* states:

Jesus meant that she was not permanently dead.

Note: That is not what Jesus meant. What Jesus meant was something you and I and the mourners cannot see. She was alive **in Him**. That is what it means to “fall asleep **in Christ**.”

- The *King James Study Bible* states:

...not dead, but sleepeth. Jesus meant that she was not permanently dead.

Note: Again, that is not what Jesus meant. Jesus actually said that “she is not dead but asleep in Him.” Jesus did not say that she was not permanently dead. Jesus said she was not dead at all. She was alive **in Him**.

- The *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible* states:

She is not permanently dead. She is temporarily dead, so “her spirit” (v. 55) needs to return. **“Asleep” is a euphemism for “dead”** (cf. John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:6, 51; 1 Thess. 5:10).

Note: Again, if sleep is a euphemism (nicer word) for being dead, then Jesus said: “She is not dead, she is dead” (i.e., as sleep is a nicer word for dead). And that truly is nonsense.

An overall comment: Once again, the commentators are all agreed on one thing: In their view, Jesus is mistaken when He declares that the girl is not dead. They all agree that she is in fact dead. Even if only temporarily. Well, hopefully this study will confirm the truth of what Jesus actually said: “She is **not** dead but sleeping.” He said **both**. If sleep is indeed a metaphor or euphemism for death *then* Jesus said: “She is not dead, she is dead (that is, asleep).”

In truth, what is happening here is that Jesus is giving His followers, including you and me, a preview of what is going to happen as a result of what He will accomplish on Golgotha. For details, read the book.