

What is the Soul?



“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”—Genesis 2:7

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die.”—Ezekiel 18:4

***“The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.”
—1 Corinthians 15:45***

“If a man die, shall he live again?”—Job 14:14

The man who does not care about the existence of God or the validity of the Bible may not care about the question “What is the soul?” But how could those who can see the abundant testimony to God in his creation and their own experience not care about the answer to a question that touches the most elemental aspect of their lives? Nearly everyone acknowledges that death is a reality, and that the physical body which carries us through this life also perishes. But the Scriptures speak of souls; and man has taught that the soul is something which lives on—indestructibly—the product of a God who cannot destroy that which he has created.

Our powers of reason tell us differently. Everywhere in the realm of human endeavor the objects which man forms are subject to his own power to destroy them. The creature, whether inanimate, animate, or robotic, is always subject to the will of its creator.

Notice, however, that nowhere do the Scriptures say that the “soul” is immortal. It makes no difference how many people may teach this idea. A person searching the Scriptures—whether in translation or the original text—cannot find such a statement. Prove it for yourself. Pick up any one of the concordances to the Bible available at any library or religious book store. Try to find that expression “immortal soul.” You will quickly discover that no such expression is found in the Scriptures. But quite to the reverse of your expectations, you will easily find that the Scriptures say that “*God is able to destroy both soul and body*”; and again, “*the soul that sinneth, it shall die.*” (Matthew 10:28; Ezekiel 18:4).

The dictionary defines “immortal” as meaning “not mortal; not liable or subject to death.” A creature which can be destroyed, therefore, is not immortal—“death-proof,” as the meaning of the word “immortality” demands. This simple fact is proof that neither “bodies” nor “souls” are immortal. Theologians may argue long and hard to prove their points, but they cannot countermand these two simple statements.

But what *is* the Soul?

Men have struggled over this question for centuries because they have tried to prove, using the Scriptures, an unscriptural idea. As a result their definitions of what the “soul” is have been undefined, vague, and elusive. It has been taught that the soul is “something” in us, but no one seems able to explain either where or what it is. Theologians like to claim that this vague unknown entity is the real intelligent being and that the body which “houses” it is just some sort of metaphysical tool. As science probes into the processes by which our bodies operate, man is finding that we are little more than a rather extensive chemical and electrical factory and that the workings of the physical affect the function of the mental and emotional and vice versa. This seems directly at odds with the way a Methodist Bishop of some years ago described the soul: “It is without interior or exterior without body, shape or parts, and you could put a million of them into a nutshell.” This well meant attempt to describe the soul seems to us rather a good definition of nothing! But our question remains unanswered. Merely scoffing at false answers is no help because there remain aspects of humanity which **do** defy description.

Destroyer of Body and Soul

The body is not the soul, as some affirm. This is proven by our Lord's statement that “*God is able to destroy both soul and body.*” And now, in view of the foregoing, if our minds are freed from prejudice, we ought to be able to learn more about this subject by turning to the inspired record of man's creation. We read from Genesis: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed [Hebrew: “blew”] into his nostrils the breath [Hebrew: “wind”] of life [Hebrew: “lives”—plural, that is such as was common to all living animals]; and man became a living soul [a sentient being]” (Genesis 2:7).

Lower Animals Also Are Souls

We see why it is that the Scriptures speak of “souls” in connection with the animal creation. They, as well as man, are sentient beings or creatures of intelligence, only of a lower order. They can see, hear, feel, taste, and smell just as does man—up to the standard of his own organism. This difference is not because man has a different kind of life from that of the lower animals; all have similar vital forces flowing from the same fountain or source, the same Creator. All creatures sustain life by the same process of consumption, digestion, elimination. They all produce blood, tissue, bones, and muscle, according to their own nature. All propagate themselves similarly, bestowing the life which originated with God upon the next generation. As species they differ in shape and mental capacity, but they are all alive.

Man's Finer Organism

Where is the difference between man and beast? We have seen that it is not in the life which

animates both. Nor is it in the lack of soul-power which we also have seen they both possess. Can it be that the sole difference is in their bodies? Yes; the natural differences are physical.

Notwithstanding the fact that God has planned in advance for the future of man as expressed in his promises—while no such plans or promises have been expressed with regard to the animals. But then, we have no indication from the scientific study of animals that they have any appreciation of metaphysics. All other things being equal, the size and weight of the brain indicates capacity and intelligence. In this respect man has been more highly endowed than the “lesser” animals.

In this discussion one can never discount the effect upon man of the fall into sin. Man's condition today is far from what it was in Eden, at which time God pronounced his creation “very good.” Sin has led to the cultivation of many of man's lower capacities and the disuse of many of his higher intellectual abilities. These capacities, however are still present, awaiting development. But that is not the case among animals. However hard one attempts to train the animal in the emotional and moral skills so easily learned by man, the animal seems inherently unable to grasp the same lesson. Simply, the Creator has endowed the human creature with a finer organism. We all breathe the same air, are made of similar flesh and bones, possess some form of intelligence, but man possesses a higher intelligence and is treated by his Creator as being on an entirely different plane. Actually, it is the proportion to which sin degrades a man and results in the emphasis of his meaner traits that men are said to be “brutish” or “animalistic”—words meaning that such men more nearly resemble animals than possessing the finer sensibilities of the human race.

To this the Scriptures agree. We read, “*To you it shall be meat, and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life* [Hebrew: “nephesh chayyah”—a living soul]” (Genesis 1:30). Again, “*Let the waters bring forth the moving creature that hath life* [Hebrew: a living soul]” (1:20—see marginal readings).

The Scripture Teaching

The same lesson—that the life principle in all creatures that take their breath through nostrils is the same—is taught in the account of the Great Flood (Genesis 6:17; 7:15,22). This fully agrees with King Solomon's statement that man and beast all have “one breath” or “*ruach*,” the Hebrew word for “‘spirit’ or ‘kind’ of life.” He says further that both animal and man die similarly (Ecclesiastes 3:19). Going a step further Solomon controverts early heathen theories about the afterlife: “*Who knoweth the spirit of man that [it] goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that [it] goeth downward to the earth*” (Ecclesiastes 3:21)? Even early men had begun to speculate on some after-life to which men went at death. This wise man challenges any proof or knowledge to that effect. This challenge to others to produce some proof of their theories or else to admit that they have no certain knowledge on such subjects follows Solomon's statement of the truth on this subject in that third chapter of Ecclesiastes.

Who to Believe—God or Satan?

There is a direct conflict between modern human teachings and the inspired Word of God. The Scriptures claim that the dead do not know anything. Theologians say that they know everything. The Bible claims that the dead are *really* dead and have really suffered the penalty for sin

pronounced upon our race—“*Dying thou shalt die*” (Genesis 2:17, literal Hebrew). The opposers take up Satan's deluding statement to Mother Eve, saying “*You shall not surely die.*” They attempt to prove that the dead are **not** dead; that God's penalty against sin **did not go into effect** and that death, far from being the sentence or curse upon our race, is a blessing, a step in a general process of evolution. The two theories are as far apart as the poles, and the two teachers of these theories are God, on the one hand, and Satan—“*a liar from the beginning*”—on the other. Which shall we believe?

No wonder many of Christianity's “great” theologians are leaving the doctrine of the Atonement. Having been blinded by the Adversary, they are taking many of their followers along with them. But the Bible declares that “*as by a man [Adam] came death, so also by a man [the man Christ Jesus] comes the resurrection of the dead; that as all in Adam die, even so all in Christ shall be made alive*” (1 Corinthians 15:21,22).

“Jesus Died, the Just for the Unjust”

While assuring us of the justice of the Divine sentence of death, the Scriptures declare that our Creator is a God of mercy and of pity. When there was no eye to pity and no arm to deliver us, his Arm (the Lord Jesus) brought salvation to us. What did he do for us? He laid down his **life** for us; “*he **died** for our sins*”; “*he **died** the just for the unjust*”; “*he poured out his soul unto **death***”; he “*made his soul an offering for [our] sin,*” and “*by his stripes we are healed*” (Romans 5:8; 1 Peter 3:18; Isaiah 53:4,6,10).

Nothing is more evident than that our Lord Jesus did not suffer an eternity of torment as the price of our redemption. Hence, if the matter needed proof, we have it here. Eternal torment was not the penalty for our sins. On the contrary, the fact that our Lord Jesus **died** for our sins and that the heavenly Father accepted that sacrifice of his life on our behalf proves that it was our **lives** that were forfeited by sin. The fullness of the divine penalty against the human race was the deprivation of **life**. The race, under sentence of death, has entered the prison house of death—the grave, *sheol*, *hades*. So it was that our Redeemer when he relinquished his life for us, went also to *sheol*, *hades*, the grave. He took our place and suffered the penalty for our sins.

But just as Jesus' **death** ransoms man from the sentence of **death**, he is able to promise that “*the hour cometh in which all that are in the graves shall hear the voice of the Son of Man, and come forth*”; “*and they that hear [obey his voice then], shall live.*” Thus, simply, he encourages us to trust and hope in the resurrection of all our dear friends who go down into the prison of death. We may extend our hopes beyond those who demonstrate the sanctifying power of the spirit of God in their lives. These, as a rule, are but a few of earth's billions. But Jesus' promise extends far beyond these to all humans. As the apostle said, “*I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep [our sleeping friends], that ye sorrow not even as others, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died [a ransom for all] and rose again [that he might be Lord and lifegiver to all] even so [let us truly believe that] those also which sleep in Jesus [whom he purchases with his precious blood] will God bring by him [from the prison house of death]*” (margin). The first resurrection is the resurrection of the blessed and holy, of the sanctified in Christ Jesus, his body.

The work of Christ and the church in bringing man back from the condition of death will have many aspects. The first work, however, will be in awakening him to a physical condition similar to that in which he died. Society will then be much improved. Knowledge will have replaced ignorance. The reign of righteousness and a law of love will have supplanted the selfishness and greed of this world. Satan will then be bound, preventing him from deceiving the nations during Christ's kingdom. Under the favorable conditions of that mediatorial kingdom, mankind will be required to progress in the knowledge of the Lord. They will have to bring their ideas and lives into agreement with his law of love. Whoever will refuse will be cut off from life—in the Second Death (Acts 3:22, 23), after what the prophet describes metaphorically as one hundred years of trial (Isaiah 65:20). Notice, however, that the prophet says that such a one, under the changed conditions then in existence, will be considered a relative “lad.”

Judgment will be upon all in that day, not just upon those who fail to make progress and are cut off from further opportunity. Those who seek righteousness and apply it in their lives—living in harmony with the laws of the kingdom—will be blessed under that judgment. Year after year they will grow mentally, physically, and morally stronger—toward the full standard of perfect manhood—the image and likeness of the Creator as first presented in father Adam.

The Dead Are Sleeping

God has gradually revealed his plans for mankind through the inspired writings of the prophets. They all address this unconscious interim between death and the resurrection morning. And with one voice they describe a state in which the sentient being is suspended, as if “asleep.” The illustration is an excellent one. Our Lord used it in speaking of Lazarus. He said that “*our friend Lazarus sleepeth, I go that I may wake him out of sleep.*” Afterwards, because the disciples were slow to understand his meaning, he explained more clearly, “*Lazarus is dead*” (John 11:11).

If men were correct in their theories about consciousness in the death condition, it would have been remarkable that Lazarus gave no account of his experiences during those four days. As it is, however, no one will claim that he was in a “hell” of torment, for our Lord calls him his “friend”; and if he had been in heaven, would our Lord have called him back from such a superior state. What sort of friendship would that have been? But our Lord expressed it simply, Lazarus was sleeping. When Lazarus was revived our Lord awakened him to life, to consciousness, to his sentient [feeling] state. This was evidently a favor that Lazarus and his friends greatly appreciated.

The thought pervades the Scriptures that we are now in the night of dying and sleeping. The kingdom of Christ, the figure of speech used by the Scriptures, is a period of “awakening” in the morning, of resurrection. “*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning*” (Psalms 30:5).

The apostles also used this hopeful and peaceful figure of speech. Luke says Stephen the martyr “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). Paul, in his Antioch speech, used the same expression when speaking of David (Acts 13:36). Peter says much the same concerning the “fathers” that fell asleep (2 Peter 3:4).

An Illustration—a Candle

At the outset we began by commenting on how poorly the soul has been explained by learned scholars. Let's use a simple illustration—a homily, just as Jesus might have used—to describe the human and animal body, the soul and spirit. A common unlighted wax candle can be used to illustrate the inanimate human body or corpse. Touching a burning match to the wick the candle ignites. This is, in a picture, much like the spark of life originally imparted by the Creator. The flame or light given off by the candle corresponds to the sentient being—the intelligence, or soul. The oxygenized atmosphere which unites with the carbon of the candle in supporting the flame corresponds to the “breath of life” or “spirit of life” which unites with the physical organism in producing “soul” or “intelligent existence.” Should an accident occur which would destroy the candle, the flame would cease. So also the human “life” or “soul” ceases when the human body is destroyed—whether by consumption or accident.

Similarly, if the supply of oxygen is cut off, the flame ceases just as if the candle were destroyed. Whether an extinguisher is used or a snuffer, the results are the same: the light is extinguished. If the breath of life is cut off from man, the reaction is the same: the soul, life, existence ceases. So it is that the body continues to exist, even though a person may die of drowning or asphyxiation. The lighted candle might be used to ignite other candles, but once extinguished the candle can neither re-ignite itself or be used to ignite other candles. Again, this is very similar to the human life. Under God's provision the human can propagate its species so long as it lives. But as soon

as the spark of life is cut off the soul or being has ceased and all power to think, to feel, or to propagate has ended. The Scriptures use this illustration in connection with Jacob's household: "*All the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls*" (Exodus 1:5). Jacob received his life as well as his physical body. The product of these two were his "soul" or "intelligent being." It had been passed on from Isaac, Abraham, and thence from Adam to whom alone God had directly imparted life. Jacob passed the life, organism, and soul to his posterity. So it has been with all mankind ever since.

Thou Sowest Not That Body Which Shall Be

A candle may be re-lit by anyone possessing a flame. But the human body wastes away, returns to the dust from which it was taken, when it is deprived of the breath of life. The human body cannot be rekindled except by divine power—a miracle. The promise of resurrection, therefore, is a promise of rekindling the soul, existence, the life. Since there can be no life without a suitable body, the promise of a resurrection also implies new bodies: the former ones having returned to the elements from which they were made. Furthermore, when we consider that the resurrection of the dead will be much like awakening from sleep, then the moment of reawakening will be—to the person being awakened—like the very next moment after his death. "*For there is neither wisdom, knowledge nor device in the grave*" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The body in which a person awakes will be practically the same as that in which he died (although not composed of the same atoms of matter). In the hands of the Creator one atom of dust is as good as another in this great work. Thus the apostle says, "*Thou sowest not that body which shall be.*" The bodies of the world, as they shall be when awakened, will be really **new** bodies, in the sense that they will be different atoms of matter; but they will be **old** bodies, in the sense that they will be duplicates of those that died and went to dust. We cannot wonder that the worldly mind, which does not know God or his power, quails at the thought of a resurrection. It will be a stupendous work, more wonderful by far than man's original creation. It will be witnessed by men and by angels as the grandest exhibition ever given of Divine omnipotence.

Omnipotence and Wisdom Displayed

The God that formed man in his own image in the beginning has, as well, the power to form him again: from the dust of the ground and rekindling the breath of life. More than in the first instance, however, in the resurrection his omnipotence and infinite wisdom will restore to each single human being his own brain—like that which a man now possesses—with its own thoughts and emotions recorded. This is not so unbelievable as it might at first seem. Men do the same today in microcosm: the phonograph records, compact disks and computers of today record billions and billions of individual bits of information. If man can conceive the technology to record things which **he** counts valuable enough to preserve, is God less than man? Ah, but only the Infinite One could conceive of such a plan to reconstruct every thought ever had by billions of humans. Should we be surprised at such all-excelling wisdom? The Scriptures say that God knows the number of hairs upon each individual head. A sparrow cannot fall to the earth without his taking notice. God alone can carry out such an amazing plan. As we learn we gain confidence in his Word; through faith we realize that such a stupendous miracle as he has **promised** will take place.

To print this booklet just click "Print" on your browser's menu.

<http://www.heleadethme.org>