

609 What Is the Soul?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

The word soul conjures up lots of thoughts to some people. People speak of the word soul rather loosely, “soul mates,” and soul talks. The word soul is even used in a variety of ways in the Bible. Some people ask the question, “Does man even have a soul?” Some wonder whether the soul will live on beyond this life. Others ask, “What is the difference between the soul and the spirit?” All these questions are relevant Bible questions and we want to look into the Word of God, the only source of real truth available to us, to find the answers to this question, “What is the soul?”

The New Testament was first written in Greek. The word “soul” is the word “*psuche*,” from which we get our word “psyche” and “psychology.” It describes the idea of “possessing life.” The Hebrew and Greek words for soul often can be translated as “life.” In Matthew 16:25-26, when Jesus said, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” The words “life” and “soul” are actually this same word “*psuche*.” It is because we have a soul from God that we have life at all. If we want to keep that life, we must lose it for Christ’s sake.

Occasionally, the word for “soul” is used for the life of creatures (such as fish in Gen. 1:20). Now this doesn’t mean that fish and men are just alike, for *only man was made in the image of God and only man has a spirit*. But the life force in an animal is like the life force that is in you. “Soul for soul” means “life for life” in Ex 21:23. In legal writings, a soul refers to a person in relation to a particular law (e.g., “If a soul shall sin . . .,” Lev 4:2). When people were counted, they were counted as souls, that is, persons. Acts 2:41 says, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Here the word soul refers to the whole person, obeying the gospel and being added to the Lord’s church.

The word “soul” sometimes, however, refers to just one part of a person, the part that is his inner, God-given being, which will last beyond this life. In this narrower sense, the soul denotes human emotions and inner abilities. People are called to love God with all their heart and soul (Matt. 22:37). Knowledge and understanding (Ps 139:14), thought (1 Sam 20:3), love (1 Sam 18:1), and memory (Lam 3:20) all originate in the soul. Here the soul comes close to what today would be called the inner self, one’s person, personality, or ego. Without a soul a man would be no different than a vegetable. It is his inner being that gives him the ability to think, to reason, and to love. We should all be thankful for having a soul. Without one we could not even have a conversation together.

Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10:28, when he sent them to preach in a time of danger: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” He was saying to them that they need to fear God far more than what any man can do to them. A man may kill you or destroy your body, but only God can destroy both body and soul in hell. Only God can punish us after this life is over. Our great accountability to God is more serious than our accountability to any court in the land. You see the soul lives on after the body dies. In the resurrection, the soul and a new body will be united. This is the soul and body which either will live with the Lord forever or be destroyed in hell.

You might be killed on this earth and still go to heaven; but if you lose your body and soul by sin and by rejecting God, that is much worse. Spiritual death, then, is much worse than physical death, because both the body and soul are destroyed in hell. Many people today (40%) do not believe in hell, but that doesn’t mean it is not real. Jesus, in fact, said more about “hell” than anyone else. If Jesus is to be trusted, and He is, then we must take the judgment, heaven

and hell seriously. It is foolish to think we can call Jesus “Lord” and only believe and obey Him when we like what He says. Unless Jesus is Lord in every matter, He is not really Lord in any matter. We cannot pick and choose our faith. The Lord is Lord in every matter.

The only thing you possess right now and that you will take into eternity is your soul. Jesus asked in Matthew 26:16, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? The real loser in this life is not one who loses his money, not one who loses his home, not one who loses his job, not one who loses his health, and not one who loses his life. The real loser in this life is one who loses his soul to sin. Once this life is over, there is no going back and changing things. The Hebrew writer said, “it is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment” (Heb. 9:27). We need to be prepared for eternity.

The good news is that everyday we live we have an opportunity to turn our lives around and live for the Lord. Jesus helps us understand that we can save or lose our souls (lives). He said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). What does he mean, “lose his life for My sake”? Jesus means that we give up our self-willed ways and follow His ways. We give up selfishness, greed, and sinful ways to live a life of purity and service like He did. We love others and teach others the truth as He did. We keep our souls pure.

Taking up a cross here does not mean that we will literally be crucified. What it does mean is that we leave the old man of sin behind and live our lives for the Lord. Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” If I want to save my soul, I will lose myself for the Lord’s sake in His service. I live and walk by faith and not by sight. I keep God’s will in my heart when I make decisions. I stay close to Him by studying my Bible and prayer. I attend church and get involved in its ministries. I speak to others about the Lord, because I love them.

You see, the perspective of the soul, judgment, and the promises of God lead me to look at all of life differently. Paul describes it this way in that letter of joy, Philippians 1:21-24, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” Living here is Christ, first and always. To die is not loss but gain; it is very much better. But Paul saw the need to serve others so that they too would be with the Lord in heaven.

I don’t know where your soul is focused, but I hope it is on Christ. Do you think Christ when you wake up, during the day, and when you go to bed at night. Do you rejoice in Him and all His blessings. When Paul wrote these words, he was in prison; and his life was at stake. He didn’t know whether he would live or die at the hands of the Roman Emperor. But whether he lived or died, he had joy in Christ. His soul was at peace, regardless of the peril, because he knew where his soul was going. If he lived, he could serve; and if he died, he could be “with” Jesus in Paradise. A faithful Christian can have confidence in the face of death, that God will bless him with joy in the presence of Christ.

In his final letter, just before he died, Paul wrote of his confidence in the future beyond this life. He said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time

of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing." That assurance kept Paul from despair and gave him hope. We can't always predict where our lives are going on this earth, but we can have great assurance in the Lord Jesus Christ and His promises.

We go to the doctor, we exercise, and we eat healthy foods, because we want healthy bodies. We must also think about having a healthy soul. What are you doing to feed the things that build up your soul. Your body will one die, no matter how well you take care of it. Your soul, however, will live on. A healthy soul is one that is right with the living God. If we live in rebellion to God, if we ignore God, if we neglect the love and the truth of God, we will surely have unhealthy souls. Our thinking will be corrupt; our attitudes will be pessimistic; our relationships will be insecure; and our future will be filled with heartache. There is an unalterable law in life. People ignore it, but no one can escape it.

That law is simple, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7,8). You can't invest your soul into the sins of this world and expect to grow stronger and better. If you sow to the fleshly, sinful things of this world, you can only expect to reap the things that will corrupt you and may corrupt those you love. If you sow to the Spirit, that is, live with a mind and heart set on serving God as taught by the Scriptures, you will find eternal life. A healthy soul here can lead to a life in heaven forever and ever.

Your soul will only be as healthy as what you feed it. Paul taught in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." These are the wholesome, healthy things that lift the spirit and build character. They bring peace and optimism; they build faith and produce joy. They bring healing to the heart and life. They give courage to face the hard struggles of life and give comfort when one faces painful days. The word of God, prayer, thanksgiving, and worship at church with brethren can help us reshape our thinking.

David said of the word of God in Psalm 19:7-11, "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; In keeping them there is great reward." You can search the world over and never find anything for your soul as good as God's word.

The word can restore you, educate you, make you wise, make your heart rejoice, make you pure, open your eyes to what is sure and certain, and give you the positive kind of fear that is clean and helps

you live forever. God's judgments are true and trustworthy. In a world of injustice they are righteous altogether. If you never open your Bible you are missing something more desirable than much gold and sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb. You have really cheated yourself out of the only kind of education that can lead you to heaven. What good is it, my friend, to have a college education but not know the Bible? It may help you pay the bills and get ahead of your neighbor, but you could lose your soul.

Jesus tells of the rich man in Luke 12, whose fields produced abundantly. He said in his heart, "What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This *very* night your soul is required of you; and *now* who will own what you have prepared?" So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." Don't let that man be you. Don't let your desire for more rob you of your soul.

This man thought he had everything. He had all the strings but one. The one he lacked was his soul. You see, your soul and mine belongs to the Lord. We are all accountable to Him for what we do in our lives. Let's not lose our souls by thinking only of ourselves and miss the point that we have a future beyond this life. My friend you may need to change your heart and life. Today is the best day to do that. If you are not a Christian believe with your heart that Jesus is the Christ, repent of your sins, confess His name, and be baptized in water to wash away your sins. If you are a Christian but have neglected your faith, why not come back to God and His church.

What is your soul? It is that inner man that makes you a unique person, made in the image of God and after His likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). God is the father of your spirit (Heb. 12:9). The soul you have is the only one you'll ever have. Take good care of your soul, for you will have to live ever after with the choices you are making right now. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 11:9, "Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things." Just as we keep our bodies healthy, we must also keep our souls healthy.

My friend, your soul is worth more than the whole world. God values it so very highly that He sent His only begotten Son to save it. Jesus loved it enough to die on the cross to take away the sins that stain your soul. Only His blood can cleanse you and make you spotless and blameless. If your hands were dirty, you'd wash them. If your face was dirty you'd wash it. You likely take a bath or shower every day. What is being done to cleanse your soul? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? My friend, are you serving the Lord as you ought to? Is your heart right with God? Have you been away from God and need to come home? Why not today start taking care of your soul, the one you'll take to eternity!

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