***Psuchē* (“Soul”)**

The Greek word often translated “soul” is *psuchē* (#5590 ψυχή, pronounced psoo-'kay), and *psuchē* has a large number of meanings. Any good Greek lexicon will show many of the ways that *psuchē* can be translated. For example, some of the meanings in the BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon* are: that which animates animal and human life; life; that which possesses life; the person himself; and the seat and center of the inner human life in its many and varied aspects, which includes desires, the seat of enjoyment, and the emotions and feelings. As well as our emotions and feelings, *psuchē* includes our attitude.

The Hebrew word sometimes translated “soul” is *nephesh* (#05315 נֶפֶשׁ), and it does not mean the same thing that the Greek word *psuchē* means, although there are many overlapping meanings. There are times when it is unhelpful to think that “*nephesh* means ‘soul,’” such as when it means “desire” or “appetite,” although the connection comes from the fact that our desires are driven by the life force inside us.

The primary meaning of “soul” in Hebrew is “self” or “life,” so when the text says that there are things that are an abomination to God’s “soul,” it means God Himself (Prov. 6:16). *Nephesh* can refer to an animal or person, or the invisible life force in an animal or person. However, like in Greek, it can also refer to the workings of the mind, including thoughts, desires, attitudes, or emotions. Also, *nephesh* can refer to a person’s or animal’s desires (Prov. 13:2) or appetites (including for food and sex), and so it can be translated “desire” or “appetite.” Thus, a person who likes to eat is referred to in Prov. 23:2 as “the owner of a *nephesh*” (“an appetite,” cf. Prov. 13:25; 16:26). Other uses of *nephesh* can be determined from the culture and context, such as the Hebrew, “the heart knows the bitterness of its soul” (Prov. 14:10), which means the heart knows its own bitterness. The “counsel of the soul” (Prov. 27:9), which means “one’s own counsel,” referring to the internal moral compass in us, or the internal thoughts which counsel our decisions. To be “wide of *nephesh*,” (wide of appetite or desire) is an idiom for being greedy (Prov. 28:25). To be “bitter of *nephesh*” is to be bitter in one’s thoughts, attitudes, and emotions (Prov. 31:6).

Although some of the definitions of the Greek word *psuchē* are found more clearly in Greek literature than in the Bible, many of them are clearly in the Bible. Meanings of “soul” (*psuchē*) that we find in the Bible include:

A. The life force that animates the body, both human and animal. Matthew 2:20 says the angel told Joseph to take Jesus back to Israel from Egypt because “those who were trying to take the child’s life [soul] are dead” (NIV). In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said he came “to give his life [soul] as a ransom for many.” Acts 20:10 speaks of Paul raising a boy from the dead and saying, “His soul [i.e., his life] is in him” (cf. John 10:11; Acts 20:24; Rom. 11:3). Revelation 8:9 speaks of the creatures of the sea that have “soul” will die. In other words, the living sea creatures will lose their life and die. The Hebrew word *nephesh*, “soul,” is also used for the life of the body of people and animals (cf. Gen. 9:4; 35:18; Exod. 21:23; Lev. 17:11, 14; 24:17, 18; Num. 35:31; Deut. 12:23; 19:21; 2 Sam. 1:9; Job 12:10; Prov. 12:10; Jer. 38:16; Jon. 1:14).

B. Emotions, attitudes, thoughts, and feelings. The phrase, “My soul is troubled” (John 12:27) is roughly equivalent to “I am feeling troubled.” When the prophet Simeon told Mary, “A sword will pierce your soul” (Luke 2:35), he was saying that Mary would be terribly hurt mentally and emotionally by things that would happen to her son, Jesus. When Acts 14:2 says, “The Jews who were defiant stirred up the souls of the Gentiles,” it means that the Gentiles were mentally and emotionally upset. In Philippians 2:20, “equal souled” means to think alike, or feel the same way about, something; thus the translation, “like-minded.” The Old Testament also uses *nephesh*, soul, in the same way, meaning thoughts, emotions, and attitudes, and also for desires and appetites (cf. Gen. 23:8; Exod. 15:9; 23:9; Lev. 26:16; Num. 11:6; Deut. 6:5; 24:15; 28:65; Judg. 10:16; 16:16; 18:25; 1 Sam. 1:10; 2 Sam. 17:8; Job 7:11; Ps. 35:13; Eccl. 6:7; Isa. 38:15). “Whatever” is in God’s “soul” almost certainly means whatever is in His “mind” (1 Sam. 2:35).

C. The person; the individual: Acts 2:43 says, “Every soul kept feeling a sense of awe,” and it means that every person felt awe. Acts 27:37 says, “(And we were, in all, 276 souls [i.e., people], in the ship.)” Romans 13:1 says, “Let every soul [person] be subject to the higher powers.” (cf. Acts 7:14). The man in Luke 12:19 says, “I will say to my soul,” meaning, “I will say to myself.” The Old Testament also uses *nephesh*, soul, to mean a person or individual (cf. Gen. 2:7; 14:21; 46:15, 18, 22; Exod. 1:5; 12:4; Lev. 11:43; 16:29; 17:12; Num. 15:27; 19:18).

The life force of the body, which we refer to as “soul,” is a type of “spirit,” so to better understand “soul,” we must understand “spirit.” The Greek noun *pneuma* is derived from the verb *pneuō* (blow, breathe out), and it refers to something invisible that exerts a force that can be seen or experienced. The Greeks used *pneuma* to refer to “wind,” “breath,” “life,” “attitude,” and “emotion,” as well as “spirit.” These are all invisible, but produce results that we can experience. Many things are called *pneuma* in the Greek New Testament. A partial list includes God (John 4:24); the gift of God known as holy spirit (Acts 2:38); angels (Heb. 1:14); demons (Mark 5:2, 8, 13); breath or life (Luke 8:55); wind (John 3:8); and attitudes, thoughts, and emotions (Matt. 26:41). All of these are invisible but can exert power that can be seen. As a kind of spirit, “soul” is invisible but it exerts a force that can be seen, both as the life that animates the body and as the emotion or attitude we express.

It can be confusing that in both the Old and New Testaments, animal and human life, as well as our emotions, feelings, and attitudes, are sometimes called “spirit” and sometimes called “soul,” but that is because “soul” is a type of spirit. “Soul” is the specific type of spirit that animates and gives life to the body. We do not get confused when sometimes a dog is called an “animal” and sometimes it is more narrowly called a “dog,” and we should not get confused when human life or feelings are sometimes called “spirit” and sometimes more specifically referred to as “soul.” Because the words “spirit” and “soul” can be used to refer to the same thing (cf. Luke 8:55), they are used in the same way in verses such as Job 7:11 and 1 Samuel 1:15. The man Job says he has anguish of spirit and bitterness of soul, saying the same thing in two different ways. In 1 Samuel, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, is troubled in her spirit and so she pours out her soul to Yahweh. She is emotionally troubled and pours those troubles out to Yahweh.

There are some very common mistakes people make when thinking about “soul.” One is that people have souls but animals do not. A second is that the soul is immortal. A third is that soul lives on after the body dies, such that the person is still alive, but as a soul without a body. A fourth is to think that when “soul” is used in the Bible, it is exclusively (or even primarily) used of the life force of the body.

As to the mistaken belief that humans have a soul but animals do not, both the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek text of the New Testament make it clear that both humans and animals have “soul” that makes them alive. Sadly, that is not at all clear in the majority of English translations, which do not translate the word “soul” literally in those verses. It is in large part because English versions do not translate “soul” literally from the Greek and Hebrew that the average Christian does not know animals have a soul. Rotherham’s Emphasized Bible often translates “soul” literally when it appears in the Hebrew text. Thus, the following verses make it plain that animals have soul as well as man does:

* “And God said—Let the waters swarm [with] an abundance of living soul…And God created the great sea monsters,—and every living soul that moveth—[with] which the waters swarmed after their kind” (Gen. 1:20, 21 Rotherham).
* “And God said—Let the land, bring forth, living soul, after its kind, tame-beast and creeping thing and wild-beast of the land, after its kind. And it was so” (Gen. 1:24 Rotherham).
* “I have given…to every living thing of the land—and to every bird of the heavens, and to every thing that moveth on the land, wherein is a living soul, every green herb for food” (Gen. 1:29, 30 Rotherham).
* “I, therefore, behold me! establishing my covenant with you [Noah],—and with your seed after you; and with every living soul that is with you, of birds, of tame-beasts, and of all wild-beasts of the earth, that are with you,—of all coming forth out of the ark” (Gen. 9:9, 10 Rotherham).
* “And if a man takes the life [soul] of any human being, he shall surely be put to death. And the one who takes the life [soul] of an animal shall make it good, life [soul] for life [soul]” (Lev. 24:17, 18 NASB. Even Rotherham has “life” instead of “soul” in this verse, which is understandable since the “soul” refers to the life of the man or animal in these verses).
* “and the third of the creatures which were in the sea, which had life [“soul”], died, the third of the ships, was destroyed” (Rev. 8:9 Rotherham; cf. Rev. 16:3).

Many other verses in the Bible show that birds, land animals, and sea creatures have soul, and these can easily be discovered by doing a search on the Hebrew word *nephesh* and the Greek word *psuchē*.

Historically, the reason that it has been taught that humans have a soul but animals do not is that it has been wrongly believed that the soul was immortal. Thus, through the years, it has been taught that it was the soul that allowed a person to live forever in heaven or hell, but animals did not live on after their body died because they did not have an immortal soul. However, that teaching is not biblical. For one thing, as we will see below, the soul is not immortal. Furthermore, it is not the presence of soul that allows a person to live forever, but the power of God to resurrect people. Believers will be resurrected in new bodies like Christ’s glorious body (Phil. 3:21), and that new body will not be animated by soul, but by spirit, a different kind of spirit (see commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:44). In this life, both humans and animals have a life force that animates the body, and the Bible calls that life force “soul.”

As for the mistaken belief that the soul is immortal, there is no such thing as an “immortal soul.” That is a traditional belief, but it is not a part of Scripture. The phrase “immortal soul” is not in the Bible, and neither is the concept of an “immortal soul,” a soul that cannot die. The Bible says very clearly that “soul” can be destroyed (Matt. 10:28). Ezekiel 18:4 says, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die,” and although that verse is using “soul” to refer to a person, the point of the text is that the person will die because his soul, his life force, will die. Furthermore, the Bible says that Jesus gave his soul as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Most English versions say that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, which is an understandable translation since “soul” is the life force of the body. Nevertheless, we must realize that Jesus gave up his soul, his life, as a ransom for many, meaning that his soul died. It had to. If Jesus did not really die, then he never actually paid the price for our sin, which is death. When God raised Jesus from the dead, his body was no longer powered by soul, but by spirit. Many verses in the Bible refer to the “soul” dying or being dead, although often *psuchē* is translated “life” in those verses, with the result that people reading the English Bible cannot see that the soul dies (cf. John 10:11, 15, 17; 13:37, 38; Acts 20:24; 27:10; 1 John 3:16; Rev. 8:9; 12:11; 16:3). So, biblically, it is clear that the “soul” *psuchē* can, and does, die, thus, it is not “immortal*.”*

It is also a mistaken belief that the soul lives on after the body dies. When the body dies, the soul is dead; gone. There were cultures such as the Greeks, largely influenced by Plato the Philosopher, who believed the soul was something like a ghost that lived on after the body died, complete with memory, cognition, and emotion. In fact, it was the Greeks who were in large part responsible for that belief coming into Christianity—first from the Jews who spoke Greek and read the Greek Bible, and then by Greek converts to Christianity. The Greeks conquered Egypt in 332 BC, and greatly influenced the Jews who lived there to believe that the soul inhabited the body and lived on after the body died. Around 250 BC, Jews in Egypt produced the Greek translation of the Old Testament we know as the Septuagint, which translates the Hebrew word *sheol* as the Greek word *hadēs*. That was a very inaccurate translation because *sheol* is “the state of being dead,” “gravedom” (the reign of the grave), and people in *sheol* were dead and not alive in any form. In contrast, in the Greek language and thought *hadēs* was the place where human souls go to live after the body dies, and in *hadēs* the souls are alive. Thus, by the stroke of a pen, the translators of the Septuagint gave life to the dead, and the Bible of those Jews who did not read Hebrew now said that when a person died, he was alive in *hadēs*. At the time of Christ, the group we know as the Pharisees was one group of Jews who believed that the soul lived on after the body died (the Sadducees did not). When those Jews were converted to Christianity, many of them continued to believe what they had always believed, and thus brought the belief of the immortal soul into Christianity.

Later, when Greeks were being converted to Christianity, they often held on to their belief that the soul lived on, and thus that belief was brought into Christianity by the Greeks as well as by some of the Jews. Eventually, the belief that the soul lived on after the body died became the traditional belief of the Church. Nevertheless, that belief is not biblical. “Soul” is simply the life that empowers the body of humans and animals, and when a person or animal dies, the soul is just gone; it does not “go” anywhere, it just dies.

It will help to clarify our thinking on the subject of the death of the soul life if we think about soul on a cellular level. The “soul” inside us is not a unified thing like a ghost in our body. “Soul” is the life that animates our body—each and every cell. Furthermore, the soul that animates a body cannot live on its own. It is sustained by a functional body. It is clear from the book of Genesis that God made “soul” to make the body alive. It is important to note that God first formed Adam’s body—and it was a fully formed and functional body—from the ground, and then put “soul,” life, into it. The “soul” that was put into Adam’s body could not live without the body, i.e., before Adam’s body was made, but also Adam’s body was not alive until it had soul—the life that animated it.

Every cell in the body has “soul,” and indeed, the existence of the soul in the cell is what differentiates a living cell from a dead one. So, for example, if a carpenter cuts off a finger, it remains alive for a short time, and during that time, it can be reattached to his body. Why? Because the “soul” that is in each cell of the finger has not died yet, so the cells are alive. In time, the cells of the finger “die” because the soul that made each of them alive dies. At that point, the finger cannot be reattached to the body. It is dead. Yet no one asks, “Where did the soul life in the finger go?” No one thinks the finger (more accurately, the individual cells in the finger), was supposed to go to heaven when it died. We are content to say that the finger “just died,” and that is the truth. Because of this reality, it is evident that the “soul” making a person alive is not some sort of “being” that can exist on its own, it is simply the life-force making a cell alive.

God did not design soul life to be something that lived forever on its own. He designed it to give life to a body and then die and be gone. There are scientists who have kept individual heart cells alive in laboratories for years. These living heart cells are alive because they have “soul,” and when the environment they live in no longer supports life, they die. At that time, the soul that animated them does not “go” anywhere; it just dies and is gone. Similarly, when a person dies, the soul life in each cell of the body dies, cell by cell. “Soul” is still “soul” and it does not “go” anywhere no matter if all the cells of the body die at approximately the same time, such as happens in a normal death, or if just some of our cells die but the person lives on, such as would happen if a soldier had an arm blown off in battle.

“Soul” is not immortal; it can and does die. However, soul can live on year after year if it has a viable body that supports it. We have the same soul as Adam. That soul was created by God for Adam about 6,000 years ago (which God then took and put in Eve also), and it has been passed down from generation to generation in the living eggs of women and the living sperm of men. The reason that an egg is alive and can be fertilized is that it has soul, and the reason a sperm is alive and can fertilize an egg is because it has soul. In the lifetime of a woman, thousands of living eggs die, and in the lifetime of a man, millions of living sperm die; yet in those cases, we do not ask where the “soul” goes. It just dies. Since “soul” empowers every cell, God never designed the soul that animates our cells to live forever. If it did, every hair that was ever pulled out of our heads by the roots would still be alive somewhere, and every sperm or egg that was ever produced by a man or woman would still be alive somewhere. Instead, God originally designed our bodies to be a perfect and ongoing environment for soul to stay alive and thus animate our bodies forever. When that perfect environment is gone (when we die), the soul in us dies and is simply gone.

Additionally, more evidence that the soul is not some sort of “being” that is immortal, but rather is not immortal, lies in the fact that the scripture says that “Christ Jesus...has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10 NIV). This means that immortality is not something inherent in humans; rather, it is something only achieved and received through the gospel message. Does every single human believe in the gospel message? No. This means that not every human has, or will have, immortality.

When the person dies, he is said to be “asleep.” That does not mean that the person, his soul, or his spirit, are literally asleep. The person is dead, and the soul and spirit are gone, as we have just seen. [For why the Bible calls death sleep, see commentary on Acts 7:60.]

Another question that understanding “soul” answers is, “When does human life begin?” The life of a new human starts when a living egg (an egg that has soul) is fertilized by a living sperm (a sperm that has soul). That fertilization starts the life of a new organism, a new person, who has “soul,” i.e., human life. The soul inside the new fetus is actually the soul that has come down from Adam, and the new fetus is clearly alive: it has metabolism, growth, movement, response to stimuli, excretion, and secretion.

It has been argued occasionally that the fetus is not alive because it does not “breathe.” Actually, the fetus does breathe, just not through its own lungs. It gets oxygen through the umbilical cord of the mother and metabolizes it into carbon dioxide that then has to be removed back through the umbilical cord. Thus, the baby “breathes” in basically the same way a person on a lung-bypass machine breathes. Doctors doing lung surgery on patients keep them alive by using a lung bypass machine that oxygenates the blood. If a doctor turned off the machine, the patient would suffocate and die. Similarly, if a pregnant woman is killed, the most common way the baby dies is by suffocation—the mother stops breathing and oxygen stops flowing to the fetus, which then suffocates. At birth, a valve in the baby’s heart that allows blood to flow to the lungs and get oxygen opens for the first time, and the baby can then get oxygen through its own lungs. At that point, the umbilical cord is no longer needed, but at the cellular level, the use of oxygen and the expelling of carbon dioxide is the same as when the baby was in the womb and the umbilical cord was its lung by-pass machine.

In conclusion, it is absolutely essential to have a proper understanding of *psuchē* and the various ways in which it is used. As a result, the biblical teachings regarding life, death, and the future resurrection become remarkably clear.