

## What did Jesus say about the soul?

These notes form part of a series of teaching entitled 'What Jesus said about ...'. They were delivered in the following sequence:

1. What did Jesus say about the soul?
2. What did Jesus say about life and death?
3. What did Jesus say about eternal life?
4. What did Jesus say about the 'intermediate state'?
5. What did Jesus say about judgement?

Also in the series are notes on 'What did Jesus say about creation, money, success and the truth?'.

### Part 1

#### Read Matthew 10:26-39

#### Introduction

My object here is to discover what Jesus says about the soul in contrast to popular misconceptions. We will see if our discoveries have any bearing on the way we see ourselves and how we think about our future.

We are asking, 'What did Jesus say about...' but clearly, we have to make reference outside the gospels in order to provide a context for what Jesus said.

#### What is the soul?

To answer this we need to go back to the beginning:

Genesis 2:7 "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living soul." (AV)

The NIV renders the phrase 'living soul' as 'living being.'

"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life (neshamah chiyim, the breath of lives) and the man became a living soul (nephesh chayah)."

Man was made from the dust of the ground.

He is presented as fully made and completed before he began to live.

Nothing is now missing that is required to make him a living man or a 'living soul' but the 'breath of life' and when God breathed this into him he became a 'living soul' or 'living being.'

The phrase 'nephesh chayah', translated in this passage 'living being' or 'living soul' applies equally to animals. The identical expression is used ten times in Genesis and twice in Leviticus and in every

case, with this exception, it is used with reference to animals. The Authorised Version translated only this one as 'living soul'. So, whatever difference there might be between man and animals it is not to be found in the use of this phrase.

This means that God does not bring a living soul and put it into this lifeless body, nor does he make a living soul within his body as something distinct from it; but by the impartation of this breath of life, Adam becomes a living soul. This describes the whole man as a 'single unit.'

"The soul is not an entity with a separate nature from the flesh and possessing or capable of a life on its own. Rather it is the life animating the flesh. Soul and flesh do not therefore go separate ways, but the flesh expresses outwardly the life or soul.....Man does not have a soul, he is a soul." James Barr

For a Hebrew, 'soul' indicated the unity of a human person; Hebrews *were* living bodies, they did not have bodies.

The word 'nephesh' is a very common term in both ancient and modern Semitic languages. It occurs over 780 times in the Old Testament. The noun refers to the essence of life, the act of breathing, taking breath. However, from that concrete concept, a number of more abstract meanings were developed. As we have seen, in its primary sense the noun appears in its first occurrence in Genesis 1:20 'living creatures' and in its second occurrence in Genesis 2:7 'living being'.

However, in over 400 later occurrences it is translated 'soul.' While this serves to make sense in most passages, it is an unfortunate mistranslation of the term. The real difficulty of the term is seen in the inability of almost all English translations to find a consistent equivalent for the term. The AV alone uses over 28 different English terms for this one Hebrew word.

The problem with the English term 'soul' is that no actual equivalent of the term or the idea behind it is represented in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew system of thought does not include the combination or opposition of the terms 'body' and 'soul,' which are really Greek and Latin in origin. The Hebrew contrasts two other concepts which are not found in the Greek and Latin tradition: 'the inner self' and 'the outer appearance' or, as viewed in a different context, 'what one is to oneself' as opposed to 'what one appears to be to one's observers.' The inner person is 'nephesh,' while the outer person, or reputation, is 'shem,' most commonly translated 'name.'

## **Jesus' use of the word 'soul'**

So, this is how Jesus would have understood it. When we find him using the word that is translated 'soul' he means 'the inner self.' There is nothing within that concept that indicates then that this 'inner self' will go on forever. If it is to go on forever we will have to find the reason for that other than in the use of the word 'soul.'

Jesus said "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). We have to consider the fact that Jesus taught that both body and soul could be destroyed.

## **Greek influences**

So, how did we get into this position of assuming that, when the Bible talks about 'the soul' it refers to that part of us that is immortal, indestructible? The answer comes, not from our Bibles, but from Greek thought that was in the ascendancy in about the 4th century BC. This is what Plato wrote in

Phaedo:

“The soul whose inseparable attitude is life will never admit of life's opposite, death. Thus the soul is shown to be immortal, and since immortal, indestructible... we believe there is such a thing as death? To be sure. And is this anything but the separation of the soul and body?... being dead is the attainment of this separation when the soul exists in herself and separate from the body, and the body is parted from the soul. That is death... death is merely the separation of the soul and body.”

It was this thinking that began to influence some of the writings between the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, sections of the New Testament were written to combat heresy that had its roots in Greek thinking – the notion that matter was evil, spirit was good and that salvation was the release of the spiritual from the physical.

We need to be diligent in our study of the Bible to ensure that what we believe is based on the Bible and not on ‘cultural assumptions.’

## Part 2

**Read Genesis 2:8,9, 15-17; 3:1-7, 21-24; Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23; John 5:21-30**

### Recap and development of our thinking

#### Hebrew thought

The problem with the English term ‘soul’ is that no actual equivalent of the term or the idea behind it is represented in the Hebrew language. The Hebrew system of thought does not include the combination or opposition of the terms ‘body’ and ‘soul,’ which are really Greek and Latin in origin. The Hebrew contrasts two other concepts which are not found in the Greek and Latin tradition: ‘the inner self’ and ‘the outer appearance’ or, as viewed in a different context, ‘what one is to oneself’ as opposed to ‘what one appears to be to one’s observers.’ The inner person is ‘nephesh,’ while the outer person, or reputation, is ‘shem,’ most commonly translated ‘name.’

With this in mind it is easy to see why the Bible speaks of desire, emotions etc residing in the soul – it is actually our inner self. That is why David addresses his inner self – there is a recognition that if life is to be good then we have to be right on the inside.

Isn't it true that we are what we are on the inside?

As a footnote, and so that we remain accurate in our thinking, it is worth bearing in mind that the word ‘soul’, in its theological sense, does not cover all the ground, or properly represent the Hebrew word ‘nephesh’. The English word ‘soul’ is from the Latin ‘solus’ – ‘alone’ or ‘sole,’ because the maintenance of man as a living organism, and all that affects his health and well-being, is the one sole or main thing in common with every living thing which the Lord God has made. The correct Latin word for the theological term ‘soul’ (or ‘nephesh’) is ‘anima,’ and this is from the Greek ‘anemos’ – ‘air’ or ‘breath,’ because it is this which keeps the whole in life and in being.

### Where did the ‘soul’ come from?

Or, is that the wrong question? If we think of the soul as a separate entity that enters the body at some stage then it is reasonable to ask how we get a soul, when do we get a soul and where does it come from? If that is the right question then the answers will be important because they will have

something to say on issues that affect the beginning of life, such as abortion and genetic engineering, as well as all that is involved with life beyond death.

Down through the ages theologians have puzzled over the origin of the soul and have come up with certain answers. I am including this information to demonstrate the muddles we can get into over this matter if our thinking is flawed in the first place. In other words, if we ask the wrong question, there will always be a problem in finding a consistent answer.

Theologians have traditionally taken one of the following three positions on the origin of the soul:

1. Theory of pre-existence. This view, which advocates that the human soul has existed previously, has its roots in non-Christian philosophy; it is taught in Hinduism and was also held by Plato, Philo, and Origen. This theory teaches that in a previous existence men were angelic spirits, and as punishment and discipline for sin, they were sent to indwell human bodies.
2. Creation theory. This theory teaches that each human soul is an immediate and individual creation by God; the body alone is propagated by the parents. This view is held by Roman Catholics and many Reformed Christians. The problem with this is - how can we explain the 'sin nature' if God creates each soul individually for God would not create something sinful?
3. Traducian theory. This view affirms that the soul as well as the body is generated by the parents. The problems with this view are: how can parents pass on the soul, which is nonmaterial? And Christ must have partaken of the sinful nature of Mary if traducianism is true.

None of these views are satisfactory simply because they miss the point. As James Barr wrote "Man does not *have* a soul, he *is* a soul." We can ask where Man comes from and the Bible clearly gives us the answer to that.

In Part 1 we demonstrated that the idea of Man possessing an immortal soul comes primarily from Greek thought rather than Hebrew. Let us go back again to the beginning of time and find out what the Bible has to say about these issues of life and death.

## In the Garden

God created Adam and Eve and put them in the Garden. Within that Garden were all kinds of trees – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food – and that included the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9). The only tree they were not to eat from was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). Clearly they were free to take from the tree of life. Now God made it abundantly clear that the result of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would be death "...when you eat of it you will surely die" (2:17). Adam had been told, Eve was then created and Adam would have passed on that instruction to Eve.

Adam and Eve would have understood the concept of death. We read of the sun and moon being "as signs to mark seasons..." (1:14) so it is reasonable to assume that they would see death in the animal and vegetable world. They would have known that, as long as they were in the Garden and had access to the tree of life they would not experience death. Tragically now sin leads to banishment from the garden. Why? So that Adam could not "reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever." Indeed, so important was it that they did not have access to this tree that cherubim and a flaming sword guarded the way to the tree of life (3:22-24).

Here, within the punishment, is God's mercy. Clearly to live forever in their present condition would

be the worst thing that could happen to Adam and Eve. But is this not what we are saying does happen if we say that there is a part of us that lives on forever – regardless?

Surely the whole point here is that Adam and Eve have forfeited the right to life. God called them to live ‘in partnership’ with him – sharing his life – eternal life – a life that depended on remaining in a trusting relationship with him.

We have grown up in a culture in which there is still an underlying assumption that life goes on after death but many ancient peoples lived out their lives with the thought that, after death, there is nothing. Life was so much more precarious then with fear of attack, disease and famine. Life expectancy was lower and they had less means of cocooning themselves away from the realities of death than we do. Losing a loved one meant literally that you would never see him or her again. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says that people in the past were ‘held in slavery by their fear of death’ (Hebrews 2:14-16).

Of course, Adam and Eve did not drop down dead when they disobeyed God but they had lost the right to share the life of God and so death would one day claim them both (Genesis 5:5). Adam lived 930 years but God would reduce the human lifespan as Man became increasingly corrupt and depraved (Genesis 6:3).

## Life and death

Throughout the Old Testament the theme of life and death is presented consistently. We have the warnings that Moses gives, especially in Deuteronomy, to choose life and not death (e.g. 8:19, 20), frequent allusions to the transient nature of man throughout Job (e.g. 21:22-26), and the clear teaching concerning the end of the ungodly in the Psalms (e.g. 1:6). Solomon tells us that ‘the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out’ (24:20) and the prophets give us the same message (e.g. Ezekiel 18:20).

The idea of the natural mortality of man was not to be found among the Hebrews. They were kept separate from the surrounding pagan nations to prevent them from imbibing their false ideas. It was not until after their long captivity, nor indeed until after Plato’s philosophy had come to dominate throughout the Grecian world and the Hebrew people were brought into association with its disciples, that their Rabbinical teachers and Pharisaical doctors began to entertain these philosophical speculations. But there is not one single hint of any such doctrine in all the Old Testament scriptures, - there are, indeed, intimations, more or less distinct, of a resurrection from the dead, and of the destruction of the wicked, in what is more plainly revealed in the New Testament, as a ‘second death,’ and, indeed, assurances to the righteous, that they would be redeemed from the power of the grave, and that ‘length of days forever and ever’ would be given them; but not one hint can be found in all these Scriptures that immortality would be the portion of all men.

So when Christ came we find the Pharisees who, as a sect had become largely Platonized, rejecting scornfully the idea of their need of a Saviour to give them eternal life; while the Sadducees, at the other extreme, denied the existence of any life whatever beyond the present.

Yet, throughout the New Testament we have this same consistent theme – namely that the end of the ungodly is death. There are numerous passages which speak of the destruction of the wicked – e.g. Matthew 3:10-12; 10:28; 13:38-40; Luke 13:3; John 15:5,6; Acts 3:23; Romans 2:12; Romans 6:21-23; Philippians 3:19. These are only a small selection from the large amount of passages that carry the same message.

Into this situation steps Jesus. When Adam and Eve sinned an animal was sacrificed to provide garments of skin and later all Israel's animal sacrifices would be part of God's provision to remedy the curse—a life for a life. The sinner was under sentence of death yet Jesus came to 'give his life as a ransom for many' (Matthew 20:28).

Now Jesus can offer life to those who are under sentence of death (John 5:21-30). But this is life with a difference. In our next talk we will look at what this life is and the implications of what we have been saying with regard to our future state – see notes 'What does Jesus say about life and death?'