



Lesson 7 The Origin of the Soul

Apologetics Press Intermediate Christian Evidences Correspondence Course

THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Throughout the whole of human history, man has struggled to find answers to a number of important (yet often difficult) questions that have to do with his origin, existence, nature, and destiny. Such questions as “Whence have I come?,” “Why am I here?,” and “Where am I going?” routinely intrigue and enthrall each of us.

Contemplate, if you will, the concept of the soul and the issues that spring from it. What is the definition of a soul? If the soul actually exists, what is its origin? When does man receive his soul? And what is the ultimate destiny of the soul? The subject of the soul has long been controversial. Some people suggest that there is no such thing as a soul. Certain individuals believe that humans possess a soul, but that it ceases to exist at the death of the body. Others are convinced humans possess an immortal soul, but that it is not given to humans until after they are born. What is the truth of the matter?

Science certainly cannot provide the answers to such questions, for they lie far beyond the reach of the scientific method. Whenever questions of spiritual importance are under consideration the only reliable source of information must by necessity be the One Who is the Originator and Sustainer of the soul. God, as Creator of all things physical and spiritual, and Himself a Spirit Being (John 4:24), is the ultimate wellspring of the soul. The Bible, then, as God’s inspired Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21), must remain the preeminent authority on this subject. In the great long ago, the psalmist wrote: “The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever” (119:160). Speaking as a member of the Godhead, Christ said: “Sanctify them by Your truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). If we want to know the truth about the soul, then we must examine that Word in an in-depth fashion and be prepared to accept what it says.

DEFINITION OF THE SOUL

If you were having a conversation with a friend and you mentioned the word “banana,” likely he would have absolutely no difficulty understanding your meaning. His thought processes immediately would conjure up a long fruit—with a yellow outer covering and a light beige, inner soft body—that grows on trees and is useful as food for both humans and animals. But if you were to ask him to define the term “foil”—without seeing the word in any specific context—he could not possibly know what you meant. You might be referring to: (1) a noun used to define a fencing sword; (2) a noun that indicates a thin, shiny metal used by cooks in kitchens all over the world; or (3) a verb used as a synonym for “defeat.” However, if you were to say, “I covered the turkey with foil prior to placing it in the oven,” he would know immediately what you had in mind.

The same is true of the definition of the word “soul.” Minus its context, it is difficult, if not impossible, to define accurately. Why is this the case? First, the word “soul” in modern English usage is represented by various words in the Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Bible was written originally. Second, those Hebrew and Greek words can have a variety of different meanings in their original contexts. In order to understand those meanings, it is necessary to examine how each word is employed within the various contexts in Scripture where it appears.

Use of the Word “Soul” in Scripture

The word for “soul” in the Bible (Hebrew *nephesh*; Greek *psuche*) is used in at least four different ways. First, the term is employed simply as a synonym for a person. Moses wrote: “All the souls (*nephesh*) that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls (*nephesh*)” (Exodus 1:5; cf. Deuteronomy 10:22). In legal matters, the word soul often was used to denote an individual. The Lord told Moses: “Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, ‘If a soul (*nephesh*) shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done’ . . .” (Leviticus 4: 2). In the New Testament, the word *psuche* is employed in the same manner. In Acts 2:41, Luke recorded that “there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls (*psuchai*).” In Peter’s first epistle, when he addressed the topic of the Genesis Flood he referred to the fact that “few, that is eight souls (*psuchai*), were saved by water” (3:20). In each of these instances, actual people—individually or collectively—were under discussion.

Second, the word soul is used to denote the form of life that man possesses in common with animals and that ceases to exist at death. In the King James Version, *nephesh* is translated as “soul” in the Old Testament 472 times, as “life” 118 times, and as “creature” 8 times; *psuche* is translated as “soul” in the New Testament 59 times and as “life” 39 times. In Genesis 1:20,24, and 30, God spoke of *nephesh hayyah*—literally “soul breathers” or “life breathers.” In speaking of God’s retribution upon the Egyptians during the time of the Exodus, the psalmist wrote: “He spared not their soul (*nephesh*) from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence” (78:50). In this particular instance, the Egyptians’ souls represented their physical life and nothing more. In the New Testament, the principle is the same. Christ observed in regard to humans: “Therefore I say unto you, be not anxious for your life (*psuche*), what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body” (Matthew 6: 25). And in Luke 14:26, we read where one of the conditions of discipleship was to hate one’s own life (*psuche*)—that is, to be willing to deny oneself to the point of losing one’s life for Christ (cf. Luke 9:23; Revelation 12:11).

Third, the idea of the soul is used to refer to the varied emotions or inner thoughts of a man—a fact that explains why *nephesh* is translated “heart” (15 times) or “mind” (15 times) in the Old Testament (KJV) and why *psuche* is translated as “heart” (1 time) and “mind” (3 times) in the New. Man was called to love God with all his heart and with all his soul (Deuteronomy 13:3). From the soul (*nephesh*) originate knowledge and understanding (Psalm 139:14), thought (1 Samuel 20:3), love (1 Samuel 18:1), and memory (Lamentations 3:20). In His discussion with a lawyer, Jesus said: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul (*psuche*), and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37).

Fourth, the word soul is used in Scripture to designate the portion of a person that is immortal and thus never dies. As early as the book of Genesis, the Bible sets forth such a concept. For example, in commenting on Rachel’s untimely death at the birth of her son, Moses wrote: “And it came to pass, as her soul (*nephesh*) was departing (for she died), that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin” (Genesis 35:18). On one occasion while the prophet Elijah was at the house of a widow in the city of Zarephath, the woman’s son fell ill and eventually died. But the text indicates that Elijah “cried unto Jehovah..., ‘O Jehovah my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul (*nephesh*) come into him again’” (1 Kings 17:21). When the psalmist prayed to Jehovah for forgiveness, he cried: “O Jehovah, have mercy upon me: heal my soul (*nephesh*); for I have sinned against thee” (41:4). In his discussion of the ultimate fate of those who trusted in earthly riches rather than in the supreme power of the God of heaven, the psalmist lamented that such people were “like the beasts that perish...but God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave” (49:12a,15).

Many years later, Christ warned His disciples: “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul (*psuche*) and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). During His discussion with the Sadducees in Matthew 22, the Lord quoted from Exodus 3:6 where God said to Moses: “**I am** the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Christ then went on to state: “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (22:32). Yet when God spoke with Moses about the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, those three men had been dead and in their tombs literally hundreds of years. Since from Christ’s own words we know that “God is not the God of the dead, but of the living,” the point is obvious. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob still must have been living. But how? The solution to the seeming problem, of course, lies in the fact that while their **bodies** had died, their immortal **souls** had not. When the apostle John was allowed to peer into the book “sealed with seven seals” (Revelation 5:1), he “saw underneath the altar the souls (*psuchas*) of them that had been slain for the word of God” (Revelation 6:9). Each of these passages is instructive of the fact that there is within man a soul that never dies.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Biblical teaching regarding man acknowledges that he is composed of two distinct parts—the physical and the spiritual. We get an introduction to the origin of the **physical** portion as early as Genesis 2:7 when the text states: “Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (*nephesh chayyah*).” It is important to recognize both what this passage is discussing and what it is not. Genesis 2:7 **is** teaching that man was given **physical life**; it **is not** teaching that man was instilled with an **immortal nature**.

The variety of terms employed in our English translations has caused some confusion as to the exact meaning of the phrase “living soul” or “living being.” Some have suggested, for example, that Genesis 2:7 is speaking specifically of man’s receiving his immortal soul or spirit. This is not the case, however, as a closer examination of the immediate and remote contexts clearly indicates. For example, the apostle Paul quoted Genesis 2:7 in 1 Corinthians 15:44-45 when he wrote: “If there is a **natural body**, there is also a **spiritual body**. So also it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living soul.’ The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” The comparison/contrast offered by the apostle between the first Adam’s “natural body” and the last Adam (Christ) as a “life-giving spirit” is absolutely critical to an understanding of Paul’s central message (and the theme of the great “resurrection chapter” of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15), and must not be overlooked in any examination of Moses’ statement in Genesis 2:7. Does this mean, therefore, that man possesses only a material nature and has no immortal soul? No, it does not!

It is true that both men and beasts ultimately die, and that in this regard man “hath no preeminence above the beasts.” Yet while both creatures are referred to as “living souls” (*nephesh chayyah*) the Scriptures make it clear that God did something special in reference to man. Genesis 1:26-27 records: “And God said, ‘Let us make man **in our image, after our likeness....**’ And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Nowhere does the Bible state or imply that animals are created in the image of God. What is it, then, that makes man different from the animals?

The answer, of course, lies partly in the fact that man possesses an immortal nature. Animals do not. God Himself is a spirit (John 4:24). And a spirit “hath not flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39). In some fashion, then, God has placed within each human a portion of His own essence—in the sense that humans possess an immortal spirit that never will die. The prophet Zechariah spoke of Jehovah, Who “stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit (*ruach*) of man within him” (12:1). The Hebrew word for “formeth,” *yatsar*, is defined as to form, fash-

ion, or shape. The same word is used in Genesis 2:7, thereby indicating that both man's physical body and his spiritual nature were formed, shaped, fashioned, or molded by God.

As the Creator, God "initiates" the object we know as man's immortal nature (i.e., his soul or spirit). King Solomon, writing in the book of Ecclesiastes, noted that "the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto **God who gave it**" (12:7, emp. added). Man's physical body was formed of the physical dust of the Earth. Would it not follow, then, that his spiritual portion would be formed from that which is spiritual? When the writer of the book of Hebrews referred to God as "the Father of our spirits" (12:9), he revealed the spiritual source of the soul—God.

WHEN DOES MAN RECEIVE HIS IMMORTAL NATURE?

When does man receive his soul? In one of the most illustrative passages within the Bible on this topic, James wrote: "The body apart from the spirit is dead" (2:26). This brief but important observation—offered by inspiration on the part of the Bible writer—carries tremendous implications. Without the presence of the spirit (which in this passage is synonymous with the soul), the physical body cannot live. There is, however, an important corollary to James' assessment. If the body is living, **then the spirit must be present!**

But when does life actually begin? The answer, quite simply, is that it begins **at conception**. When the male and female gametes join to form the zygote, it is at that moment that the formation of a new body begins. Within 72 hours after fertilization, the zygote (now referred to as an embryo) will have divided a total of four times and will consist of sixteen cells. Each cell will divide before it reaches the size of the cell that produced it; hence, the cells will become progressively smaller with each division. By the end of the first month, the embryo will have reached a length of only one-eighth of an inch, but already will consist of millions of cells. By the end of the ninth month, if all proceeds via normal channels, a baby is ready to be born. As one biologist (and author of a widely used secular university biology textbook) noted: "As soon as the egg is touched by the head of a sperm, it undergoes violent pulsating movements which unite the twenty-three chromosomes of the sperm with its own genetic complement. From this single cell (about 1/175 of an inch in diameter), **a baby** weighing several pounds and composed of trillions of cells will be delivered about 266 days later" (Wallace, 1975, p. 194, emp. added).

Is "it" alive? Of course "it" is alive. Consider the following scientific facts regarding the living nature of the fetus.

- (1) The baby's heart forms by the end of the third week after conception, with contractions beginning on days 21-22; on days 22-23, the neural tube begins to develop.
- (2) By the age of two months, the heart beats so strongly that a doctor actually can listen to it with a Doppler stethoscope, and by the end of the fifth week the heart is fully partitioned.
- (3) At 40 days after fertilization, electrical waves (as measured by an electroencephalogram) can be recorded within the baby's brain, indicating brain activity.
- (4) Around days 26-27, the respiratory system begins to form, including the larynx, trachea, bronchi, and lungs.
- (5) Early in the fourth week, the liver, gallbladder, and biliary duct system have formed.
- (6) By the age of two months, "the embryo has distinct human characteristics." Everything is "in place"—feet, hands, head, organs, etc. Upon close examination, fingerprints are evident. Although less than an inch long, the embryo has a head with eyes and ears, a simple digestive system, kidneys, liver, a heart that beats, a bloodstream of its own, and the beginning of a brain.
- (7) The unborn child hiccups, sucks his or her thumb, wakes, and sleeps.
- (8) The unborn child responds to touch, pain, cold, sound, and light.

Is the child alive? Do you know any **dead** creature that attains such marvelous accomplishments?

How, exactly, does God view this unborn-yet-fully-human child? He said to the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; **before you were born I sanctified you**" (Jeremiah 1:5, emp. added). Jehovah knew the prophet—even while he was *in utero* (in the uterus)—and viewed him as a living person. Further, God already had "sanctified" Jeremiah. If his mother had aborted the baby, she would have killed someone that God Himself recognized as a living person. The same concept applied to the prophet Isaiah who said: "Listen, O isles, unto me, and hearken ye peoples, from afar; **Jehovah hath called me from the womb**; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.... And now, saith Jehovah that **formed me from the womb** to be his servant..." (Isaiah 49: 1,5, emp. added). Jehovah not only viewed Isaiah as a person prior to his birth, but even called him by name.

David, writing in Psalm 139:13-16, provided one of the clearest and most compelling discussions on the nature and importance of life *in utero* when he wrote:

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in secret and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them.

The phrases, "I was made in secret" and "skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth," refer to the psalmist's development in the womb. Notice also that David employed the pronouns "me," "my," and "I" throughout the passage in reference to his own prenatal state. Such usage clearly shows that David was referring to himself, and one cannot talk about himself without having reference to a living human being. The Bible thus acknowledges that individuals are living human beings while in their mother's womb (and prior to their birth).

The fact that the zygote/embryo/fetus is living thus becomes critically important in answering the question, "When does man receive his immortal nature?" When James observed that "the body apart from the spirit is dead" (2:26), the corollary automatically inherent in his statement became the fact that **if the body is living, then the spirit must be present**. Since at each stage of its development the zygote/embryo/fetus is living, it must have had a soul instilled at conception. No other view is in accord with both the biblical and scientific evidence.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have learned that the word soul can have various meanings. We also learned that God is the origin and source of the soul that is given to man at conception. In the next lesson, we will continue our examination of the soul by studying its nature and destiny.

REFERENCES

Wallace, Robert A. (1975), *Biology: The World of Life* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear).

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3. What is the Hebrew word for "soul"?
 (a) *psuche* (b) *nephesh* (c) *logos* (d) *agape*
4. Genesis 2:7 teaches that man was given which of the following?
 (a) Physical life (b) An immortal nature
 (c) Nine lives (d) Few days to live upon Earth
5. When does a baby's heart start beating?
 (a) 18-25 days after concep- (b) Just before birth
 tion. (d) 6 months after conception
 (c) At birth

MATCHING

Match the Bible verse with the idea in the verse (place the correct letter in the space provided by each number).

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. ____ God is the Father of spirits | A. Zechariah 12:1 |
| 2. ____ "Before you were born I sanctified you" | B. Genesis 1:26-27 |
| 3. ____ God's word is truth | C. Ecclesiastes 12:7 |
| 4. ____ The spirit will return to God who gave it | D. James 2:26 |
| 5. ____ God forms the spirit of man within him | E. John 17:17 |
| 6. ____ God made man in His own image | F. Matthew 22:32 |
| 7. ____ God is the God of the living | G. Hebrews 12:9 |
| 8. ____ The body apart from the spirit is dead | H. Jeremiah 1:5 |

FILL IN THE BLANKS

1. _____ cannot provide answers to questions about the soul of man because they lie far beyond the reach of the scientific _____.

2. In order to understand the different meanings of the word “soul,” it is necessary to examine how the word is used within the various _____ in _____ where it appears.
3. _____ is the Greek word for “soul.”
4. From a _____ cell about 1/175 of an inch in diameter, **a baby** weighing several pounds and composed of _____ of cells will be delivered about _____ days later.
5. Biblical teaching regarding man acknowledges that he is composed of _____ distinct parts—the _____ and the _____.

NOTES/COMMENTS

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