

The BIBLE Meaning of 'Soul'

"Whosoever toucheth the dead body (or soul = Hebrew word "nephesh") of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself ...shall be cut off"- Num. 19:13

TO THE average person, the word "soul" carries the meaning of an undying, consciousness after death. This conception is accepted without thought or examination.

As soon as we start to look into the question, however, we begin to make very interesting discoveries. We find, first of all, that *the BIBLE meaning of soul is ALTOGETHER DIFFERENT from this*, and immediately the question arises:

How can the commonly accepted religious conception of soul be entirely different from the scriptural meaning of "soul" of the Bible, seeing that the beliefs of Christendom are *supposed* to be based upon the Bible?

When we turn to works of reference by the learned expositors of the immortal soul theory, we see most of them make no attempt to conceal the fact that scriptural teaching and popular theology are very different regarding the meaning of "soul." They are in fact, proud that they have developed many "improvements" upon what they consider the partial and hazy conceptions voiced by the-

"Holy men of God who spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21)

We find ourselves forced to choose between Scripture teaching, and orthodox Christianity. It is very fortunate for us that the issue is so clearcut, and that the leading exponents of the immortal soul theory are so frank in admission of its non-Biblical origin. 'Webster's Dictionary says-

"The Christian conception of the soul DERIVES FROM THE GREEK, especially as modified by the MYSTERY CULTS, as well as from the Bible ..."The more exact determination of the Christian conception was reserved for the Church Fathers, especially Saint Augustine, who taught that it is simple, immaterial and spiritual, devoid of quality and spatial extension. He argued its immortality from the fact that it is the repository of imperishable truth."

Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary is even more to the point:

"Among the ancient Hebrews 'soul' was the equivalent of the principle of life as embodied in living creatures, and this meaning is continued throughout the Bible . . .

"It was Augustine especially who, in part on religious grounds and in part as the disciple of the later GREEK PHILOSOPHY, taught the simple, immaterial and spiritual nature of the human soul - a view which has remained that of the scholastic philosophy and of Christian theologians down to the present time."

The well-known Hasting's Bible Dictionary freely admits-

"Soul, throughout a great part of the Bible, simply is the equivalent of 'life' embodied in living creatures. In the earlier usage of the Old Testament it has no reference to the later philosophical meaning - the animating principle - still less to the idea of an 'immaterial nature' which will survive the body."

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, says-

"Soul has various shades of meaning in the Old Testament, which may be summarized as follows: Soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, appetite, emotion and passion. **"Nephesh"** (the original Hebrew word for

soul), can only denote the individual life WITH A MATERIAL ORGANIZATION OR BODY. In the New Testament “**psuche**” (original word for soul in Greek) appears under more or less similar conditions as in the Old Testament.”

Young's Concordance defines both *nephesh* and *psuche* as "animal soul."

Strong's Concordance defines *nephesh* as, "a breathing creature, an animal; or, abstractly, vitality." *Psuche* is also defined as "The animal, sentient principle."

The noted lexicographer Parkhurst (himself a believer in immortal soulism) says-

"As a noun, **nephesh** hath been supposed to signify the spiritual part of man, or what we commonly call his soul. I must for myself confess that **I can find no passages where it hath undoubtedly this meaning.**"

These quotations show clearly that the immortal soul doctrine is generally admitted by its supporters to be entirely different from the BIBLE meaning of soul, and based mainly upon GREEK PHILOSOPHY.

The issue then is this: is the Word of God to be our final authority, or is religious truth something to be gradually developed by man's speculation on the basis of pagan Greek philosophy?

For nearly 2000 years, the bulk of Christendom, beginning with the Church Fathers, have favored the latter, but there has always been a few who have regarded the BIBLE as wholly inspired by God, consistent from beginning to end, and the only possible source of true knowledge of such things as life, death and the nature and destiny of man.

A Bible that is anything less than this is NO BIBLE AT ALL. And the Bible itself leaves no room for compromise. It takes a bold and unequivocal stand throughout as the direct Word of God in every part. We must accept it as that, or else throw it away entirely as the most brazen and blasphemous of falsehood.

Those who take the middle ground are the Bible's greatest enemies, and this unfortunately includes the vast majority of professing Christians. They dare not openly deny its divinity, because it is so obviously divine, but they seek to rob it of all power by spinning an endless web of theories around it that confuse the mind and distract the attention, and obscure its plain, clear teaching.

The following brief outline of the BIBLICAL use of the term is for those few to whom the Bible is still the one unique Book among millions - the inspired divine message to man - one verse of which is worth more than countless volumes of the cloudy, inconclusive speculations of human philosophy and "modern wisdom."

As previously noted, in the Old Testament, the original Hebrew word for soul is *NEPHESH*. In the New Testament, the original Greek word is *PSUCHE*. *Both mean the same thing and are both translated "soul".* One is used to translate the other.

Nephesh occurs about 750 times. About 500 times it is translated "soul" in the King James Version. The other 250 times it is translated by over 40 different English words, as shown on the following chart.

CORRESPONDING WORDS

English-soul → Hebrew-nephesh → Greek-psuche Latin-*anima*

MEANINGS OF NEPHESH

- (1) A breathing body, a living creature, **an animal.**
- (2) Animal life
- (3) Functions, qualities of human creatures

WORDS USED IN KJV TRANSLATION

(Soul, 472 times-All the others together, 282)

1. soul translated: man, **lust**, **beast**, **creature**, **body**, **dead fish**, **a thing**, **person**, anyone, he, her himself herself, myself, self, themselves, they, yourselves, own soul, breath ghost life, **appetite**, mind heart will desire, pleasure, **mortality**, **deadly**, refresh, heartily, **greedy**, contented

USES OF NEPHESH (with one example listed in each case)

22 times- used of animals alone (not humans) (Gen. 1:20-28)

7 times- Of men and animals together (ex Num. 31:28)

53 times- Of individuals, persons (ex Gen. 2:7)

96 times- Of persons doing things (ex Lev. 5: 1, 2, 4)

22 times- Of man: **appetites and animal desires** (ex Pro. 6:30, Gen. 34.3)

231 times- Of man: mental faculties, emotions (ex Gen. 34.3, Num. 21:4)

22 times- Souls **cut off by God** (Psa. 78:50)

32 times- Souls **killed by man** (Josh 11: 11)

242 times- Souls **subject to DEATH** (Eze. 18:4, Psa. 22:29)

13 times- Souls **actually DEAD** (Isa. 53:12)

13 times- Souls **going to grave** (Job 33:22)

(NOTE- over 320 times in scripture, souls are dead, dying, or subject to death)

Psuche occurs about 100 times, and is translated similarly.

It is quite obvious at the outset that a word of such broad application, *including all the animal kingdom, in all its bodily, physical aspects*, CANNOT POSSIBLY indicate some immortal essence in man *distinguishing* him from the lower creation.

It is clear from the words used to translate it that it is related throughout to ANIMAL BODIES, including man, and this will become more and more clear as we consider some of the passages in which it is used.

THE FIRST FOUR OCCURRENCES OF THE WORD "NEPHESH" RELATE EXCLUSIVELY TO ANIMALS.

That is a good fact to start with and to remember. A good foundation. Let us get them firmly in our mind-

Gen 1:20-21-"And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life" (The word "life" here is **nephesh-soul**).

"And God created great whales, and every living creature (**nephesh-soul**) that moveth, which the water brought forth abundantly."

V. 24-"The living creatures (**nephesh**) after his kind, cattle and creeping things."

V. 30-"Every beast . . every fowl . . everything that creepeth, wherein there is life (**nephesh**)."

Then, having prepared our understanding by applying *nephesh* four times to every species of living creature on the earth, the Scriptures' next use of the word is in the record of the creation of man (Gen. 2:7)-

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground."

-and that in itself is a phrase to be well noted when we consider the nature and composition of man-

"The Lord God formed man of the dust of ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (**nephesh**)."

-EXACTLY THE SAME WORD already applied four times to animals. Man, formed of the dust of the ground, became a living soul (an animal, breathing creature) when God breathed into him the breath of life.

Now the usual response at this point from the immortal soulist is to switch over to the word *spirit*, and abandon the argument based on *soul*. Our present subject, however, is SOUL, and we hope to thoroughly dispose of *that*, but in passing it may be mentioned that *exactly the same remarks apply to "spirit."* It, too, in these early foundation chapters of Genesis, is used of animals alone, and also of men and animal together, and to the same point Solomon says-

"Man and beasts-they have all ONE spirit" (Eccl. 3:19).

In applying both these words, *soul* **AND** *spirit*, to animals as well as to men, the Scriptures seem to be taking special care to protect us from erroneous conceptions, if only we will heed and accept its divine guidance, and not depend upon the Greek philosophers against whose teachings the Apostle Paul so bitterly contended and so vehemently warned.

We have considered the first five occurrences. Of the next eight, SIX are applied to animals. There are seven places where the word is applied to *man and animals together without distinction*. An interesting example is Num. 31:28-

"Levy a tribute .. one SOUL (nephesh) of 500, both of the persons, of the beeves, of the asses, and of the sheep,"

One more typical passage of the use of *soul* for animals before we go on, Prov. 12:10-

"A righteous man regardeth the life (nephesh-SOUL) of his beast; but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel."

Surely we can consider it definitely established, therefore, that *there is no difference between men and animals in the matter of being or having souls*. This IS **VERY IMPORTANT**. It is one of the first principles of Scripture. If we have not definitely fixed this in our minds, let us keep going back over these facts and passages and stick with them. They are worth more than all the volumes ever written of Greek or modern philosophy.

The sentence passed on Adam is in full accord with the record of his creation from the dust (Gen. 3:19)-

"Dust THOU art, and unto dust shalt THOU return."

The sentence was passed upon the *conscious, thinking, sinning individual-the LIVING SOUL*, created from dust, and animated by breath from God. This in harmony with the general expression of the dispensation of God's justice, as expressed through Ezekiel-

"The soul that sinneth, IT SHALL DIE." (Eze.18:4.)

Any attempt to transfer this sentence from the thinking, responsible Adam to his mere body is such an obviously weak subterfuge as not to be worthy of serious consideration.

And finally, we note, in passing, very distinctly that in this first pronouncement of the wages of sin, THERE IS **NO** MENTION OF ETERNAL TORTURE - but on the contrary, the sentence is *dissolution into original dust*.

SOUL IS NATURAL, ORDINARY FUNCTIONS OF ANIMAL BODIES

"He that killeth the soul of a beast shall make it good - soul for soul"-Leviticus 24:18.

NOW A few passages to show that "soul" (Hebrew: *nephesh*) is not some immaterial essence, but is applied to the ordinary, natural functions of living creatures-

Prov. 6:30-"Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul (*nephesh*) when he is hungry."

Isa. 29:8 - *"A hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul (**nephesh**) is empty-a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh, but he awaketh, and his soul (**nephesh**) hath appetite."*

Lev. 17:10-*"I will set my face against the soul (**nephesh**) that eateth blood, for the life (nephesh-soul) of the flesh is in the blood."*

Deut. 12:20-23-*"Thy soul (**nephesh**) longeth to eat flesh; thou mayest eat flesh, whatsoever thy soul (**nephesh**) lusteth after "The blood is the life (nephesh-soul); and thou mayest not eat the life (nephesh-soul)."*

It is clear that the immortal soulists' only solution is to do what they have done, and regard the Bible as merely the speculations of partially enlightened men. They could not possibly agree with Peter's statement (2 Pet. 1:21), that

"Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

SOUL IS MORTAL, SUBJECT TO DEATH: 300 REFERENCES

Now we reach what perhaps may be termed the climax of the subject- the soul's *relation to death*. The term "immortal soul" expresses one side of the argument. "Immortal" means *"not subject to death."* That was the view of Plato as well as orthodox Christendom. Let us look at what GOD says. Now it would have been quite possible for the Scriptures never to have mentioned soul in connection with death. Many other terms and expressions could have been used. So, when we find that in *nearly 300 places* (one-third of the total uses of the word) souls are described as being **mortal, subject to death**, from which they can be saved and delivered. It is quite clear that God is taking special pains to give us correct ideas on this subject, and remove all excuses for believing in "immortal souls" after the manner of the unenlightened heathen.

Examples of this are-

Psa. 22:20-*"Deliver my soul (**nephesh**) from the sword."*

Jer. 38:17-*"If thou wilt go forth unto the King of Babylon, then thy soul (**nephesh**) shall live."*

1 Sam. 19:11-*"If thou save not thy life (nephesh-soul) tonight, tomorrow thou shalt be slain."*

1 Kings 19:10-*"They seek my life (**nephesh**) to take it."*

Esth. 7:7- *"He stood to make a request for his life (**nephesh**)."*

Psa. 22:29-*"None can keep alive his own soul (**nephesh**)."*

One out of every three occurrences of the word are of this character- referring to its *mortality* and *liability to death*. How could the immortal soul theory be more strikingly disproved? The most prominent fact regarding the soul that is forced upon our attention throughout is its *frailty* and *danger of destruction*. Upon this is based the one great lesson of Scripture-

"Hear, and your soul (nephesh) shall live" (Isa. 55:3).

SOULS KILLED BY MAN:

Let us go further. In 32 passages, souls (**nephesh**) are spoken of as being KILLED BY MAN. Examples are:

Josh. 10:28-*"Joshua took Makkedah, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and the king thereof he utterly destroyed, and all the souls (**nephesh**) that were therein."*

This is repeated in vs. 30, 32, 35, 37, and 39.

Deut. 27:25-*"Cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person (**nephesh-soul**)."*

Let us look particularly at Lev. 24:17-18. The KJV reads

"Hethat killeth any man shall surely be put to death, and he that killeth a beast shall make it good; beast for beast."

In the original, *nephesh* occurs here 4 times, as follows

*"He that smiteth the **nephesh** (soul) of a man, shall be put to death. And he that smiteth the **nephesh** (soul) of a beast shall make it good, **nephesh** for **nephesh**."*

Here again the translators have, by inconsistent and biased translation, obscured another clear divine lesson in the meaning of *nephesh*, or "soul."

SOULS ACTUALLY DEAD

One more step, and then we are as far away from the immortal soul theory as it is possible to be → in 13 places souls (*nephesh*) are said to be actually **DEAD**. Examples are

Num. 6:6 *"He shall come at no dead body (nephesh).*

Lev. 21:11 *"Neither go unto any dead body (nephesh).*

These are parts of the Mosaic regulations concerning uncleanness and defilement by contact with corpses.

"SOUL" IN N.T. CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM "SOUL" IN O.T.

All references quoted so far have been from the Old Testament. That is the foundation of the New, and the word "soul" occurs in the Old *seven times as often* as in the New. It is ignoring the foundation work of the Old Testament that has prevented so many from understanding the New.

The Bible is one single, indivisible unit. It cannot be broken up and a part cast aside. Only when it is regarded as one equally inspired and equally divine book can it be properly understood. God has varied His commands at different times to different people, but *statements of FACT and TRUTH never change from beginning to end.*

"Soul" in the New Testament cannot be considered apart from soul in the Old. Considering them together, we find them in complete harmony. As in the Old, so in the New, "soul" is used of animals; it is spoken of as dying; it is used for the mind, the heart, the appetite and the emotions.

SOUL in New Testament - ANIMALS, DYING, NATURAL FUNCTIONS

Similarly souls are applied to animals, and souls die in the New Testament just as in the Old Testament. In Revelation 8:9 we read:

"And the third part of the creatures that were in the sea, and had life (psuche-soul) died."

Rev. 16:3 *"Every living soul (psuche) died in the sea."*

And "soul" is used for natural life and functions, as in the O.T..

In Matt. 6:25, Jesus says-

"Take NO THOUGHT for your life (Psuche-soul), what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink."

The soul here is clearly that which is supported by eating and drinking.

Acts 15:25 we read-

"Our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that hazarded their lives (psuche) for the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In faithfully serving Christ they certainly could not have been *hazarding immortal souls*, but they WERE hazarding their *scriptural* souls-their *natural* lives and bodies.

The same applies to Paul's words in Acts 20:2-

"Neither count I my life (psuche) dear to myself, so that I neither finish my course with joy."

And Jesus' words (John 10-17)- *"I lay down my life (psuche) for the sheep."*

And Phil. 2:30- *"Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, NOT REGARDING his life (psuche)."*

In all these, *psuche* is used in the common sense of *natural life*, and cannot be harmonized with the immortal soul idea. FEW PLACES (OUT OF HUNDREDS) CAN BE TWISTED TO FIT IMMORTAL SOUL

Now, as in the Old, so in the New, there are a few passages where the use of the word *could* possibly be made to fit with the immortal soul idea. There are none, of course, that *prove* or even *support* this idea (that would be impossible as we can see from the basic meaning and general use of the word) but there are some where it *could* be interpreted if the rest is ignored.

The passage most frequently quoted is Matt 10:28-

*"Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him Which is able to **DESTROY** both soul and body in hell"*

Now it is rather peculiar at the outset that the one passage most quoted to support the indestructible soul theory is the very one that that speaks of the soul being DESTROYED, but, we find that these people do not regard "destroyed" as meaning destroyed, but the opposite- eternally preserved.

And we find further that they do not regard "death" as meaning *death*, but "eternal LIFE in misery." *We can see that with definitions such as this we could make anything prove anything.*

What is meant here by saying that man *cannot* kill the soul? Are the Scriptures contradictory? Of course they are not. We must use wisdom to discern them properly. There is no difficulty in understanding what Christ means, if we *sincerely seek a scriptural solution*. Man can kill the body, but this has no permanent effect on our ultimate existence. To the faithful, this is but a brief sleep. In *this* sense, the ultimate, eternal sense, man can not kill the soul, or life. But God on the other hand is able to blot us out of existence forever and make all our memories to perish.

SUMMARY

TO sum up the points that have been covered:

1. We have seen that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is traced to heathen Greek philosophers, and its followers are quite willing to concede that the Bible meaning of soul is something very different.

2. The issue is clear and there is no middle ground - we must choose between Bible teaching and human speculation.

3. The word **nephesh (Old Testament)** and **psuche (New Testament)**, translated "soul," occur 850 times in the Bible and in **not one case is there any suggestion of immortality.**

4. One-third of all its occurrences speak of it in terms indicating its mortality and subjection to death.

5. It is often spoken of as being **killed by man**, and it is several times spoken of as **actually being dead**, and being handled and touched in a dead state.

6. The word is first used of ANIMALS.

7. The translators have used over 40 words in translation and looking at this list shows how far different the **Bible** soul is from the **orthodox** one.

Anything more different from the immortal soul theory would be difficult to imagine.

IN CONCLUSION, let us urge two points of action:

FIRST, make a thorough, scriptural examination of the word "soul". The word occurs 850 times. Make the effort to trace the word throughout Scripture. Compare them with the general, hazy ideas on the subject. It takes time, but ***there is no other way***. God requires us to work and search.

SECOND, having determined the facts of what we are (perishing creatures of dust) investigate God's great offer of what we may *become*...

"There is a natural (soul) body and there is a spiritual body. "As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly."

"This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."

These glorious words of the Apostle Paul will be fulfilled someday in the great joyful host of the redeemed, as they stand assembled before the judge of all the earth.

For all *others* it will be

"As the beasts that perish."

"Like sheep are they laid in the grave, death shall feed upon them, and their beauty shall consume in the grave."

*"For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not **perish**, but have everlasting life.*

Let US choose the path of wisdom and life. -G.V.G.