

The Soul, Soul-life, and Transformation

The Greek word for *soul*, ψυχή, carries a number of different meanings. As the entry on ψυχή in Arndt and Gingrich's lexicon states, "It is oft. impossible to draw hard and fast lines betw. the meanings of this many-sided word." The understanding of the word is not made any easier by the commonly held notion that the spirit and soul are synonymous and that human beings consist of two parts, a physical body and an immaterial soul. In this article we will accept the notion that mankind consists of three parts,¹ that ψυχή is distinct from the human spirit, and go on to consider the finer notion of the different meanings of ψυχή, particularly in terms of its significance in relation to transformation in God's economy and to its use in references to the soul-life and the faculties of the soul.

The Meaning of ψυχή

The different meanings of ψυχή are interrelated. Etymologically the word probably derives from ψύχω, meaning to "breathe" or "blow."² From this comes the notion that ψυχή means *life*. It can be seen as the life that animates the body, the breathing organism. In the New Testament ψυχή can refer to the human and animal life (Rev. 8:9), especially in terms of the destruction of life and in the giving up or laying down of one's life (Matt. 2:20; 20:28; John 10:11, 15, 17; 13:37-38; 15:13).

The reference to the deceased as souls is another denotation of ψυχή (Rev. 6:9; 20:4; cf. Luke 12:20). Once a human being stops breathing, human life as we know it ceases, and the inanimate, immaterial part, the soul (along with the human spirit) departs from the human body.

Ψυχή also refers to the faculties of the soul as distinct from the functions of the human spirit (1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12; cf. 1 Cor. 2:14; 15:44, 46) or the body (Matt. 10:28; Rev. 18:13, where *slaves* is literally *bodies*). Ψυχή is used to refer to the faculties of the human soul in its entirety—e.g., "find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:29), "the heart and soul" (Acts 4:32), "establishing the souls of the disciples" (14:22), "doing the will of God from the soul" (Eph. 6:6), and "work from the soul" (Col. 3:23). Ψυχή encompassed the human faculties that have the capacity for volition and desire (Rev. 18:14), emotion and

feeling (e.g., sorrow, Mark 14:34; love, 12:30; delight, Matt. 12:18; Heb. 10:38), and thoughts (reasonings, Luke 2:35).

Ψυχή is also used by metonymy, in which a part, usually the most important, is used to refer to the whole person or the whole human being. In creation mankind is referred to as a "living soul" (1 Cor. 15:45; Gen. 2:7). Human beings are counted as "souls"; for example, eight souls were saved in Noah's ark (1 Pet. 3:20), and three thousand souls were added to the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41; so also 7:14; 27:37). This is a common way of counting employed in the Old Testament (Exo. 1:5; Deut. 10:22).

Ψυχή and God's Economy: The Life and Faculties of the Soul

The first and third denotations mentioned above, the life and faculties of the soul, have particular and finer significance in terms of God's economy, or His plan of salvation. While the first denotation of ψυχή refers to human life in its created sense, it also refers to human life after its corruption by the fall. After the fall a negative, satanic element entered the human life and affected the whole human vessel. In addition to the human spirit being deadened (cf. Eph. 2:1, 5) and the human body beginning to decay and die (Rom. 7:24; 1:23; 1 Cor. 15:53-54), the ψυχή became corrupted and assumed the persona of the self, a life independent from God that seeks to gratify its own desires and purposes. In order to distinguish the human life corrupted by the fall from the created human life, the term *soul-life* or *self-life* has been employed by some expositors of the Bible.³ The God-created faculties of the soul were damaged by the fall. The mind has become disapproved (Rom. 1:28; 2 Tim. 3:8), the will stubborn, and the emotions fickle.

In God's economy the human ψυχή-life in its fallen, corrupted state needs to be denied and terminated through the subjective working of the cross, and the soul with its faculties needs to be transformed and uplifted. It is primarily in the realm of the soul that transformation takes place. This is a metabolic process in which the old element is discharged and replaced with a new element. The old element is the soul-life, and the new element is

the divine life, which is added to and uplifts the faculties of the soul. The believers are “transformed by the renewing of the mind” (Rom. 12:2), “renewed in the spirit of [the] mind” (Eph. 4:23), “have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16), can have their “love in Christ Jesus” (16:24), and desire not their will, but the Father’s be done (cf. Luke 22:42).

Some of the most crucial verses that imply this process are found in the Gospels. These are the paradoxical sayings of Jesus concerning the denial of the soul-life. These sayings are recorded in four occasions in the Gospels. The first is when Jesus sent out His twelve disciples (Matt. 10:38-39; Luke 14:26-27), the second occurs after the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, the revelation of the church, and the revelation of His death (Matt. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:23-25), the third is in answer to a question regarding the coming of the kingdom of God (17:33), and the fourth is when Jesus went up to Jerusalem to be crucified (John 12:25).

On the first occasion, when Jesus sent out His twelve disciples, He said, “He who finds his soul-life shall lose it, and he who loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 10:39), and unless a disciple hates his own soul-life, he cannot be Jesus’ disciple (Luke 14:26). He also mentions the taking up and carrying of the cross by the disciples (Matt. 10:38; Luke 14:27).

On the second occasion, after the revelation of Jesus as the Christ, of the church, and of His death, Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25; Mark 8:35 [which has “and the gospel’s shall save it”]; Luke 9:24). In Matthew 16:24 He mentions that he who wants to come after Him needs to “deny himself and take up his cross [“daily” in Luke 9:23] and follow Me.” In Matthew 16:26 He mentions forfeiting the soul-life (forfeiting himself in Luke 9:25).

On the third occasion, Jesus states, “Whoever seeks to preserve his soul-life will lose it, and whoever loses it will preserve it alive” (Luke 17:33). Finally, in John 12:25 He says, “He who loves his soul-life loses it; and he who hates his soul-life in this world shall keep it unto eternal life.”

In summary, the soul-life is lost if someone finds it, wants to save it, seeks to preserve it, and loves it. Conversely, if the soul-life is hated or lost, it will be found, saved, preserved alive, and kept unto eternal life.

To make some sense out of these paradoxical sayings of Jesus, it is necessary to look at the structure of the statements, the context in which they were spoken, and the Greek words employed by the writers of the Gospels.

The core of all of the statements regarding the soul-life mentioned above is composed of examples of antithetical parallelism in which each parallel structure consists of two parts, the first part, or the protasis, is an indefinite general condition: “if anyone...”; the second part, or apodosis, is a future result: “then he will...” These conditional clauses are set against each other in that the first apodosis, contains a negative future result and the second apodosis, a positive future result.

According to the context we have to ask when the condition is fulfilled and when the future result occurs. Although these statements were mostly spoken in the context of the Lord Jesus going to the cross, in which He gave up His life in a once-for-all act, He was applying the statements to the disciples not just in terms of the prospect of the loss of their human life through martyrdom, but also in reference to their whole earthly existence. This is clear from Luke 9:23 where the bearing of the cross is daily, and the fact that the denial of the self (not just a once-in-a-lifetime act) is explained in terms of the loss of the soul-life. The future result also may be considered not only as a once-for-all occurrence at the consummation of the age but also as a daily occurrence which transpires whenever the condition is fulfilled and will come to its fruition at the consummation of the age.

Now we will look at the words used in the first section of the parallel statements and apply them to the soul-life. The word *find* also means “discover,” “explore,” and “acquire” and can be applied to the realm of soulish enjoyment. The person discovers more soulish enjoyment as he indulges himself or participates in various activities. The word *save* also means “to keep safe and sound, to rescue from danger or destruction.” It means to preserve the soul-life from being destroyed or to suffer any loss. The word *preserve* (περι-ποιου’μαι) is a compound of the preposition περί (*around*) and the middle voice of ποιέω (*do or make*) and literally means “to make for oneself [from what is] around,” i.e., to build up the soul-life with the enjoyment of what surrounds us in our environment, to linger on the earthly material things (Luke 17:31). As Westcott states, the person who seeks to preserve his soul-life “seeks to gather round himself that which is perishable” (123). The word *love* (φιλέω) indicates natural affection, to “baby” our soul-life. However, if someone finds his soul-life, wants to save it, seeks to preserve it, and loves it, he will lose it.

The word translated *lose* (ἀπόλλομι), which occurs in all four statements, also has the meaning of “destroy, kill, abolish, render useless, and perish.” We could say then that the ψυχή is damaged by soulish exploration, self-indulgence, and being kept from destruction, suffering, and loss; by being built up by the enjoyment of various external pursuits; and by our natural affection or self-love

towards ourselves. It perishes when it is occupied with perishable things.

Conversely, in the parallel statements those who hate their soul-life and lose it receive a positive result. The same word *lose* (ἀπόλλομι) that is employed in the first half of the statement is used again. Those who “destroy, kill, abolish, and render useless” their soul-life through the subjective working of the cross, in union and communion with Christ, receive a positive outcome. Christ lived such a life in which He denied His soul-life (which was not corrupted by the fall yet had the potential to be independent from God) by living by the divine life of the Father (John 6:57), doing nothing from Himself (5:30), and not speaking from Himself (7:18). In the same way, the believers through their union with Him can live a life free from their self or soul-life. These are those who have died to sin (Rom. 6:2), reckon themselves dead to sin (v. 11), stand on the fact that they are crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20) and that the old man has been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6), and die daily (1 Cor. 15:31). As a result, the ψυχή will be found, saved, preserved alive, and kept unto eternal life. The words *found* and *saved* are the same as mentioned above. The believers discover the ψυχή when they enter and explore a new divine and mystical realm of the life of God, and the ψυχή acquires a new life. The ψυχή is saved from eternal perdition and torment as well as dispensational punishment and its regret. The ψυχή is also preserved alive. *Preserved alive* comes from ζωογονέω which literally means “bring forth alive” or “beget in life” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:13). The ψυχή enters the realm of the divine eternal ζωή life of God; it is preserved in life, brought forth in life, and filled with life. As a result, the ψυχή is kept, or guarded, unto eternal life. It is saturated with eternal life and forever kept in the realm of the divine, eternal life.

In the above sections I have deliberately not translated ψυχή when it is referenced in the second half, or apodosis, of the phrases as the pronoun *it*. Part of the reason for this is that it may not be best to understand this in terms of the soul-life only. There is no doubt ground for understanding this to refer to the enjoyment (or lack thereof) of the soul-life in the next age. However, what is the basis for that enjoyment and future reward? It is not due only to acts of self-sacrifice committed by the believer, but much more it is proportionate to the degree of transformation that the believer’s soul has undergone while living on the earth. In light of this, it may be more appropriate to consider the pronoun *it* as a reference to the faculties of the soul in addition to the soul-life. After the termination of his soul-life, the believer finds, discovers, or explores a new realm in which the faculties of his soul are renewed and uplifted when he is filled with the divine life. This is the realm that human beings were created to be in—saturated with God’s life as partakers of the tree of

life (cf. Gen. 2:9). The soul is saved, or preserved from harm, by being saturated with the indestructible, incorruptible life of God (Heb. 7:16; cf. 1 Pet. 1:23). It is preserved alive as the faculties are brought forth in life. As a result, faculties such as the mind become a mind of life (Rom. 8:6). Finally, the faculties of the soul are kept, or guarded, unto eternal life, unto the reward of a greater enjoyment of eternal life in the next age and in eternity.

This view of the loss of the soul-life through the subjective working of the cross in union with Christ and the transformation of the faculties of the soul through the impartation of the divine life corresponds with the view of God’s organic salvation. The future reward is not just a judicial prize awarded to the believer who lives a selfless life, but much more a reward of enjoying the result of the process of the transformation of the soul. This will be the real enjoyment and satisfaction for the soul. It will reach its true potential, that for which it was created, renewed, and uplifted by the divine life.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹Cf. my article in the January 1998 issue of *A & C* “The Progressive Revelation of Man,” which addresses this issue in more detail.

²Part of the confusion of the word ψυχή may be due to the similar etymologies of ψυχή and πνεύμα (πνεύμα derives from the verb πνέω also meaning *breathe* or *blow*). This corresponds with the origin of the soul according to Genesis 2:7: “Jehovah God formed man with the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” The breathing of God into the human formed the spirit of man within him (Zech. 12:1), and it caused man to become a living soul (1 Cor. 15:45). This human spirit is concealed within the soul of man. Hence, there is some difficulty in distinguishing between the two parts, as is indicated by Hebrews 4:12.

³The term *self-life* was used by inner-life writers such as Madame Guyon in *Union with God*, and the term *soul-life* in *The Soul and the Spirit: A Glimpse into Bible Psychology*, by Jessie Penn-Lewis. *Self-life* and *soulish life* was used by Mary E. MacDonough in *God’s Plan of Redemption*. *Self-life* appears in *The School of Christ* and *soul-life* in *The Reality of the Cross of Christ* by T. Austin-Sparks.

Works Cited

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