

What is a Soul? Is “Soul” Different than “Spirit”? – Bible Words

[Wes](#)

Christians use the word “soul” a lot. We talk about the eternal destiny of the soul. We talk about Jesus coming to save our soul. But what does the word “soul” actually mean? Is “soul” synonymous with “spirit”? When we think of a “soul,” should we picture a disembodied spirit? Let’s explore the word “soul” and see how the biblical authors used the words we translate “soul.”



The First Mention of “Soul”

The Hebrew word we translate "soul" is "nephesh" and it is found several times in the opening pages of Genesis. When the word is first used about humans, it says, "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (KJV). The King James Version translates "nephesh" as, "soul," but other English translations use:

- person (NASB)
- being (NIV)
- creature (ESV)

Notice that a "soul" (person, being, creature) is not something Adam was said to *have*, but something Adam was said to *be*. Similarly, the word "nephesh" is also used to describe all kinds of animals/creatures ([Genesis 1:21](#), [24](#), [30](#)). Strictly speaking, anything "that has the breath of life" ([Genesis 1:30](#)) is a "soul." Notice I did not say that all creatures *have* souls, but all creatures *are* souls.

It isn't being a soul that separates humans from animals, but rather that humans are uniquely made in the image of God ([Genesis 1:26-27](#)).

Your "Life" or Your "Self"

The words translated "soul" in the Old Testament ("nephesh") and New Testament ("psuche") both refer to a

person's self, life, or existence. Notably, when the biblical authors say their life is in danger, they often say their "soul" is in danger. They very often are not referring to the afterlife, but to their current life. Consider [Psalm 7:1-5](#):

"O LORD my God, in you do I take refuge; save me from all my pursuers and deliver me, lest **like a lion they tear my soul apart**, rending it in pieces, with none to deliver. O LORD my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, if I have repaid my friend with evil or plundered my enemy without cause, let **the enemy pursue my soul and overtake it**, and let him trample my life to the ground and lay my glory in the dust."

The psalmist is not in a *spiritual* battle with demonic forces, but rather with very physical enemies who are trying to kill him. Asking God to save his *soul* means he wants God to save his *life*.

We see similar usage in the New Testament with the Greek word, "psuche." For example, Paul said Prisca and Aquila, "Risked their necks for my life (psuche)." It is often difficult for modern readers to see this usage because sometimes English translations use, "life" and sometimes they use, "soul."

Consider Jesus' statement in [Matthew 16:24-26](#):

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his [psuche] will lose it, but whoever loses his [psuche] for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his [psuche]? Or what shall a man give in return for his [psuche]?”

In the ESV, the first two uses of “psuche” in this passage are translated, “life” and the second two are translated “soul.” The translators are obviously trying to distinguish between life in this age and life in the age to come, but the lack of consistency seems to obscure what Jesus is saying. Losing our soul/life means dying and saving our soul/life means living, whether now or in the resurrection.

Spirit and Soul

While the words “spirit” and “soul” are not strictly synonymous, there is often overlap in meaning. Both of these words can be used when talking about deep-seated emotions, thoughts, or desires. In other words, they can both be used to speak of our “inner” self or our “core” self.

Both in Hebrew and Greek, the word for “spirit” is also the word for “wind” or “breath.” Like the invisible wind that moves a ship across the sea, the “spirit” is the invisible and intangible aspect of a person that drives them to action and makes them alive. Our “spirit” has to do with our emotions,

thoughts, and desires; but it also has to do with the fact that **humans are bodies but are more than simply bodies**. As soon as we die, our breath or spirit departs from our bodies and like a flag when the wind ceases, our bodies become lifeless. We are no longer what we were, our bodies have lost the invisible aspect of ourselves that made us alive.

The word "soul" can also be used to refer to our inner self (where we think, feel, and desire). The word, "being" is a good synonym here. When I say, "My being" I could mean my whole self (including my body). However, I might also say, "I love my wife from the depths of my very being." Even though I am using the word, "being" to refer to the place where I am thinking and feeling, I am not using "being" as something I merely *have*, but something I *am*. Similarly, even when spoken of as the seat of desire, a "soul" is what a person *is*, rather than merely what he *possesses*.

Interestingly, a dead body can be called a "soul" (see the use of "nephesh" in [Numbers 5:2](#); [6:6](#); [6:11](#); [9:6](#)), but a dead body can NOT be called a "spirit." Modern people still use the word "soul" in a similar way when saying, "There are 200 souls on board this plane." In other words, a spirit dwells *within* a body, but is not a body; while "soul" refers to the whole "person" or "being" (including the body). To distinguish it another way, the word "spirit" is always about an *intangible* aspect of existence, while "soul" can include

every aspect of existence.

Conclusion: Be Concerned for Souls

If we want to use the word "soul" in a way that reflects biblical usage, we will primarily use it as something people *are* rather than something people *have*. We can use it to refer to a person's whole life, self, or being. We can also use it to talk about the seat of a person's deepest desires, thoughts, and emotions. But we must avoid some common "soul" pitfalls.

Christians are right to say our concern should be for "souls," but by this we should mean concern for whole people. There is a very serious problem when Christians say our concern is for "souls" in a way that reflects a lack of concern with things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and showing hospitality. Being concerned for "souls" should mean serving BOTH the temporal and eternal needs of our neighbors (see [James 2:14-17](#)).

The Gospel is not merely about saving the intangible aspect of people's existence (their "spirit"). When God saves a soul, he saves the whole soul, including the physical aspect. The apostle Paul says God will "give **life to your mortal bodies** through his Spirit" ([Romans 8:11](#)) and we wait eagerly for "the **redemption of our bodies**" ([Romans 8:23](#)). God is concerned for souls and we ought to be concerned for souls

as well; which is why we both preach the Gospel AND feed the hungry.

Human beings are souls, a human soul is compromised of both spirit and body, and bodies have needs. Our bodies need to be fed, clothed, and sheltered. Our bodies also need to be saved by the redemptive work of Jesus. So, yes, Christians need to be concerned for souls...all of the needs of human souls.

I love you and God loves you,

Wes McAdams