

Spirit, Soul and Body

by Raymond Golsworthy

Understanding the distinction between spirit, soul, and body is crucial for a genuine Christian experience, and the Bible teaches that true contact with God comes through the human spirit responding to the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: John 20:28, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:18, Philippians 3:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, Hebrews 12:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Human Nature"

Description

Raymond Golsworthy preaches on the intricate relationship between spirit, soul, and body as outlined in the Bible. He emphasizes the importance of understanding these three separate parts of human beings and the need to maintain the spiritual order of spirit, soul, and body. Golsworthy warns against falling into a counterfeit form of Christianity rooted in the soul rather than the spirit, stressing the significance of a spiritual response to God's Gospel and the necessity of looking to Jesus for spiritual progress.

Transcript

What a masterpiece of wisdom the Bible is! While it provides us with everything we need to know, it mercifully withholds from us the much that we would like to know, but which it would not be in our highest interests to know, at present. As an example of this, we would like to have full and crystal-clear information on the subject of 'spirit, soul, and body', with not a doubt remaining on any aspect of the subject. But an all-wise God has not planned it thus and we must be satisfied that He has His own good reasons. He does not want any of His affairs to become rigidly mechanical to us, for that would bring great loss. And then, again, we have to realise that the main focus of scripture is on the person of Christ and it must always remain so. Hence God has deliberately dimmed all peripheral matters so that we may give undivided attention to that dear person, the risen reigning redeemer Himself.

In the brief study now before us, we have sincerely tried to present what the Bible says concerning spirit, soul, and body, and we have conscientiously drawn some solemn and far-reaching conclusions from that. It has been a humbling exercise, but also a blessed one. Again and again, we have found ourselves uttering the exultant cry of the Psalmist, "What is man that thou art mindful (mind-full) of him" (Psalm 8:4). We trust our readers may be led to do the same!

Spirit, soul and body; the three separate parts

The Bible plainly tells us that man is a tri-partite being; he is a spirit, soul and body. Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that their "whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless" (1 Thess. 5:23), leaving a clear gap, we notice, between each separate part. While the distinctiveness of the body is self-apparent, it is very easy, and we believe dangerous, to confuse spirit and soul, always viewing those two entities as simply a single inner man, only to be distinguished from the body, which we call the outer man. The verse we have quoted, however, teaches that soul and spirit are also to be kept distinct and may not be equated or confused. Then again, in Hebrews, we read that the word of God is a sharp two-edged sword which is capable of dividing between soul and spirit (Heb. 4:12) and in fact does so. The rest of that same verse then infers that these two parts may actually be likened to joints and marrow, which, of course, are not the same thing. Let us now examine what the Bible says about these three parts of man.

The human spirit

The Greek word here is 'pneuma', which is also used of the Holy Spirit. The same word is translated wind in John 3:8 and wind, we know, is something mysterious and invisible. This is certainly true of the human spirit and it indicates the vastness of our present subject. Seeking to be as concise as we can, we would say that the overall teaching of the Bible is that the human spirit is that inmost part of man from which he is able and intended to have his link with God; to know Him, to have fellowship with Him and to worshipping Him. And, indeed, it is his link with all heavenly things.

A helpful verse in this connection is 2 Cor. 4:18 where Paul speaks of looking at the things that are not seen and the things that are eternal. This, surely, is a spirit-function and so evidently brought with it its own great reward: an exceeding weight of glory (verse 17). Exactly what that weight of glory amounts to we may not at present know, but the fact itself surely makes us long to know more of this living in the spirit.

The human soul

The original word here is 'psuche', from which we derived our English word psychology. From a survey of relevant scriptures we conclude that the soul is that part of man by which he relates to natural things, to the natural world, as distinct from spiritual things and the spiritual world. It is the area of man's involvement in merely human affairs, all that is going on around him, as distinct from what is above him! Hence the man who lives in the 'soul realm' is actually called the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14), literally the 'soul man' (Greek psuchicos). The same verse declares that that man "receives not the things of the Spirit of God, they are foolishness unto him." That is why one writer declared that "it is useless to teach spiritual things to a soulish (soul-governed) man, for he has no means of grasping them."

The soul itself may also be said to possess three parts.

- 1) The mind (intellect), by which we think. Actually, 'psuche' is sometimes translated mind, e.g. in Heb. 12:3.
- 2) The heart (emotions), by which we feel. Again, the word 'psuche' is translated heart, as in Eph.6:6. Here, surely, is our ability to love, our capacity for affectionate attachment to things or persons, or, conversely, our ability to hate such things or persons.

Heart, also, in this case, can be said to include our whole emotional and aesthetic make-up and there are factors here which can easily be mistaken for spirituality.

Soft music (or the exact opposite), beautiful architecture, impressive vestments, etc., often make us feel good, even 'Christian', and they can easily deceive us. So we do need to be careful. Be it said, however, that God has positive plans to enhance and sublimate all these capacities and powers, once the total man comes under His control. But this is some thing we shall discuss later. Let us be warned, however, regarding false alternatives.

3) The will (volition), by which we determine, or intend. Such actions of the will are seen in verses like Luke 23:25, John 1:13, 1 Pet. 4:3 and 2 Pet.1:21). We need to note here, very particularly, that whilst men's will may still operate strongly and sincerely in the realm of religious ,or even Christian things, that in itself does not prove any real relationship with God, or bring about such relationship. True contact with God can only be by means of our human spirit as it responds to the deep movings of the Holy Spirit.

Reviewing, then, we must settle it that man cannot think himself into a real fellowship with God, no matter how brilliant or theologically-inclined the mind might be. Nor can he 'emotionalise' himself into that blessedness, nor get there by sheer exercise of will. God has appointed for us a far humbler way, requiring a facing of the sin question. This is a spiritual matter involving the conscience and it leads on to repentance before God and personal trust in the Saviour. (See Mark1:15, Acts 20:21, Heb. 6:1a). We are entering a spiritual world and we must enter this world in a spiritual way, as God helps us.

The human body

Little, perhaps, needs to be said about this in our present study. We can note, however, that in scripture the body is referred to as a tabernacle or tent (2 Cor. 5:1,4; 2 Pet.1:13,14) and this, we know, is a purely temporary dwelling place. It could also be viewed as a container; containing within itself our souls and spirits. It is interesting to notice that our present bodies are called natural bodies, or literally, 'soul-bodies', meaning bodies mainly appropriate to the soul (see 1 Cor.15:44). We read that these are going to be exchanged, in due time, for spiritual bodies, bodies appropriate to the spirit. This coming exchange is called the redemption (lit. loosing away) of our bodies (Rom. 8:23) and certainly we are waiting for it! For the present, however, we are still wearing 'the body of our low estate' (see Phil. 3:21 and Luke 1:48; same Greek). It is mainly our link with the purely material world around us.

We would like to remark here, however, that even now the body of the Christian may know a blessed foretaste of that coming redemption. Once the inmost-spirit is enlivened (at new birth) and as the soul comes and remains under spirit-control, the body too is also blessed and benefited and even beautified. We think of the shining face of Stephen (Acts 6.15), for instance, and other such cases. We ourselves have met many shining Christians, even in a physical sense, and we can only say that the beauty of the Lord their God was clearly upon them (Psalm 90:17). Is it not a fact that even an old and battered tent has a beauty all its own if it has a bright light shining within it? Perhaps that phenomenon may also be regarded as an earnest of our inheritance (Eph.1:14).

Spirit, soul and body; some thoughts on the saving of the soul

In the preceding paragraphs we have sought to define the three separate parts of the human being and we now wish to draw attention to what the Bible calls the saving of the soul. It will be well here to quote from three New Testament verses which have a clear bearing on our subject.

"We believe, to the saving of the soul." Heb. 10:39

"The Word is able to save your souls." Jas. 1:21

"...the end of your faith (i.e. its goal), the salvation of your souls." 1 Pet. 1:9

While the above verses certainly have a distinct bearing on the ultimate destiny and eternal welfare of the believer, we believe that they also refer to his present inward experience in the explicit area of the soul. The idea is that the soul, with its varied functions and faculties, is now being progressively released into its full potential. This certainly accords with the force of the original Greek word for save or salvation (*soteria*), which always has healing in view, healing of one kind or another. It is the word used, for instance, in connection with the healing of the lame beggar in Acts 4, there translated 'made whole' (verse 9). The idea behind the word is that of restoration to originally intended condition, and God is wanting to do just that for our souls. We need to realise that in the unbeliever the soul is grievously sick; mind, heart and will are all severely limited and quite unable to function to the full and certainly the soul cannot enter into the wonderful realm of spiritual things. But God has plans to heal that soul and to recover all that has been lost to it. All praise to His name! Let us now consider the release of the various individual components of the soul, and we could perhaps set it out as follows.

1) The person's mind experiences a progressive enlargement and enlightenment and, in every respect, and for every purpose, there is a new God-given alertness. Certainly this is true in spiritual things, where the mind had become so darkened (Eph. 4:18), there is a new seeing and a new understanding" (Eph. 1:18; John 9:25).

2) As for the believer's heart, or emotions, there is a similar healing and recovery in that area. The very word love takes on a new meaning and dimension and where previously we mainly loved ourselves (2 Tim. 3:2), we now find we love others. Best of all we find that we truly love our Lord and we love His things. We also have a big new heart for all His people everywhere. (Psalm 116:1; Luke 10:27). Our joys, too, are immeasurably multiplied, so that we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory. We can even rejoice in all kinds of sicknesses (2 Cor. 12:9,10) and sufferings (Rom. 5:3). It is interesting to note that, when Peter saw his greatly persecuted friends showing so much joy in their trials, he remarked that by such an attitude, they were receiving the salvation of their souls (1 Pet. 1:8,9). Their happy hearts were entering into the kind of fullness they were originally designed for.

3) It is the same with our wills: the will too experiences a glorious release. Lesser ambitions and pursuits just drop away from us and we find ourselves pressing toward the mark for the prize of the high calling (Phil. 3:12-14). Our released wills moreover are now set on knowing Christ (Phil. 3:8-10) and, strange to say, we find we have an equal determination to know nothing among men save Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1,2).

All this, we believe, is involved in the saving of our souls. In concluding our remarks, we feel we need to make it very clear that the soul, in itself, is not to be regarded as an evil thing! It is only a vessel or vehicle and the important thing is who, or what, is controlling it. Fullness comes when the soul remains restfully subject to the human spirit and thus, of course, to the Holy Spirit Himself. Praise God, our Lord Jesus sets men free (John 8:36) and He liberates each and every part of man's being. May the Lord give us Grace to go to Him about all these things.

Spirit, soul, and body; some thoughts on soulful Christianity

In view of what we have now written, we feel that we must immediately draw attention to a specially serious situation, namely the existence of what we can only call a counterfeit and soulless Christianity. It is an immense phenomenon and multitudes, we fear, are deceived and captured by it. The fact is, that it is really rooted in man's soul as distinct from his spirit. Intellect, emotion and volition are the main motivating factors.

It works out somewhat as follows. A man's intellect tells him there must be a God behind existing phenomena: his emotions, too, are stirred by what he feels about that God, specially in view of what the Bible tells us about Him. Then, man's will is called upon to align itself with these deductions, producing perhaps something of an improved life-style. Certain organising abilities are then called upon to produce a suitable framework for the system and more human drive is conscripted to see that 'it' works and spreads. The product, however, is only a travesty of the true, but multitudes everywhere are captured by it.

Surely this is one of Satan's greatest counterfeits: something entirely different from the spiritual reality which God has ever had in view, namely the testimony of His Son, the true Christian church which is Christ's body. (See Eph. 1:4,22,23; Phil. 3:3; Rev. 1:9; etc.). We need to realise that Christianity is something essentially spiritual, man's spiritual response to God's revealed Gospel. And we enter into that glorious reality in God's appointed way, namely a humble and penitential acceptance of His redeeming grace. This is a spiritual exercise and it requires a simple trusting in a living Christ to meet the sinner's need, to meet my need. This is God's ordained way into spiritual life and likewise to spiritual knowledge and spiritual worship. But we need to point out that the important thing is that there is a spiritual order here that must be maintained if there is to be spiritual progress. The order is first of all spirit, then soul, then body. But, thank God that order will be maintained, consciously or unconsciously, if we live under the Lordship of Christ and tread the pathway of prayer. Our heavenly Father is always there to help us in these things. May the Lord open our eyes regarding these important matters and bring us into the blessedness of his church.

Spirit, soul, and body; an accompanying warning

Thank God, it is not necessary to know all about our human constitution, and about the operation and interaction of the various contributing parts. In fact, it would be a distinct tragedy if we looked too much within. We are told to run the race set before us, looking unto Jesus (Heb. 12:2) and that is the ever important thing. The Holy Spirit consistently points us away from ourselves and on to our risen and ascended Lord and we are told that, while we behold His glory, we are changed into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18). Within certain limits it is still good for us to know ourselves also, as best we can, but looking away immediately to our Lord Jesus Christ. Looking within and making shrewd assessments of ourselves will inevitably be counter-productive if it ends there. Hence, we do feel compelled to issue this warning. Let us lift up our heads (see Luke 21:28).

The fact is that when Christ is in his place everything else will be in its place. Under the Holy Spirit our human spirits will, perhaps unconsciously, be uppermost and we shall maintain a heart for God and for his gracious word. Our souls and our bodies, in that order, will then be ready and willing servants to the spirit. They will express and live in all that is reaching us from the Lord. In a word, we shall be spiritual Christians, whether we know much, or little, or nothing about our tripartite constitution.

As an act of fellowship then, could we not right now fall at the feet of our blessed and worthy Saviour, saying to Him what Thomas said to Him: "My Lord, and my God" (John 20:28). If that continues as our

basic language and our true longing, it will certainly be very costly to us, but we can be assured that He will patiently lead us along His own appointed pathway. He will always be the great Shepherd of his sheep.

All glory to His name.

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