

# Spirit, Soul and Body

by Watchman Nee

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*Watchman Nee's sermon explores the tripartite nature of man, emphasizing the distinct roles of spirit, soul, and body in spiritual life and maturity.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 2:7, Luke 1:46-47, John 6:63, Romans 8:16, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 15:44, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12

**Topics:** "Spiritual Maturity", "Tripartite Nature of Man"

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## Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the tripartite nature of human beings, consisting of spirit, soul, and body, arguing that understanding this distinction is crucial for spiritual maturity. He explains that the soul is the meeting point of the spirit and body, and it is through the soul that individuals express their personality and make choices. Nee warns that failing to differentiate between the spirit and soul can lead to confusion in spiritual life, causing believers to mistake soulish experiences for spiritual ones. He illustrates the relationship between these three parts using the analogy of a temple, where the spirit represents the Holy of Holies, the soul the Holy Place, and the body the outer court. Ultimately, he calls for believers to allow their spirit to govern their entire being, aligning with God's intended order.

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## Transcript

THE ORDINARY concept of the constitution of human beings is dualistic-soul and body. According to this concept soul is the invisible inner spiritual part, while body is the visible outer corporal part. Though there is some truth to this, it is nevertheless inaccurate. Such an opinion comes from fallen man, not from God; apart from God's revelation, no concept is dependable. That the body is man's outward sheath is undoubtedly correct, but the Bible never confuses spirit and soul as though they are the same. Not only are they different in terms; their very natures differ from each other. The Word of God does not divide man into the two parts of soul and body. It treats man, rather, as tripartite-spirit, soul and body. I Thessalonians 5.23 reads: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This verse precisely shows that the whole

man is divided into three parts. The Apostle Paul refers here to the complete sanctification of believers, "sanctify you wholly." According to the Apostle, how is a person wholly sanctified? By his spirit and soul and body being kept. From this we can easily understand that the whole person comprises these three parts. This verse also makes a distinction between spirit and soul; otherwise, Paul would have said simply

"your soul." Since God has distinguished the human spirit from the human soul, we conclude that man is composed of not two, but three, parts: spirit, soul and body.

Is it a matter of any consequence to divide spirit and soul? It is an issue of supreme importance for it affects tremendously the spiritual life of a believer. How can a believer understand spiritual life if he does not know what is the extent of the realm of the spirit? Without such understanding how can he grow spiritually? To fail to distinguish between spirit and soul is fatal to spiritual maturity. Christians often account what is soulical. as spiritual, and thus they remain in a soulish state and seek not what is really spiritual. How can we escape loss if we confuse what God has divided?

Spiritual knowledge is very important to spiritual life. Let us add, however, that it is equally as, if not more, important for a believer to be humble and willing to accept the teaching of the Holy Spirit. If so, the Holy Spirit will grant him the experience of the dividing of spirit and soul, although he may not have too much knowledge concerning this truth. On the one hand, the most ignorant believer, without the slightest idea of the division of spirit and soul, may yet experience such a dividing in real life. On the other hand, the most informed believer, completely conversant with the truth concerning spirit and soul, may nonetheless have no experience of it. Far better is that person who may have both the knowledge and the experience. The majority, however, lack such experience. Consequently, it is well initially to lead these to know the different functions of spirit and soul and then to encourage them to seek what is spiritual.

Other portions of the Scriptures make this same differentiation between spirit and soul. "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4.12). The writer in this verse divides man's non-corporal elements into two parts, 11 soul and spirit." The corporal part is mentioned here as including the joints and marroworgans of motion and sensation. When the priest uses the sword to cut and completely dissect the sacrifice, nothing inside can be hidden. Even joint and marrow are separated. In like manner the Lord Jesus uses the Word of God on His people to separate thoroughly, to pierce even to the division of the spiritual, the soulical, and the physical. And from this it follows that since soul and spirit can be divided, they must be different in nature. It is thus evident here that man is a composite of three parts.

## THE CREATION OF MAN

"And Jehovah God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2.7 ASV). When God first created man He formed him of dust from the ground, and then breathed "the breath of life" into his nostrils. As soon as the breath of life, which became man's spirit, came into contact with man's body, the soul was produced. Hence the soul is the combination of man's body and spirit. The Scriptures therefore call man "a living soul." The breath of life became man's spirit; that is, the principle of life within him. The Lord Jesus tells us "it is the spirit that gives life" (John 6.63). This breath of life comes from the Lord of Creation. However, we must not confuse man's spirit with God's Holy Spirit. The latter differs from our human spirit. Romans 8.16 demonstrates their difference by declaring that "it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." The original of the word "life" in "breath of life"

is chay and is in the plural. This may refer to the fact that the inbreathing of God produced a twofold life, soulical and spiritual. When the inbreathing of God entered man's body it became the spirit of man; but when the spirit reacted with the body the soul was produced. This explains the source of our spiritual and

soulical lives. We must recognize, though, that this spirit is not God's Own life, for "the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (job 33.4). It is not the entrance of the uncreated life of God into man, neither is it that life of God which we receive at regeneration. What we receive at new birth is God's Own life as typified by the tree of life. But our human spirit, though permanently existing, is void of "eternal life."

"Formed man of dust from the ground" refers to man's body; "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" refers to man's spirit as it came from God; and "Man became a living soul" refers to man's soul when the body was quickened by the spirit and brought into being a living and self-conscious man. A complete man is a trinitythe composite of spirit, soul and body. According to Genesis 2.7, man was made up of only two independent elements, the corporeal and the spiritual; but when God placed the spirit within the casing of the earth, the soul was produced. The spirit of man touching the dead body produced the soul. The body apart from the spirit was dead, but with the spirit man was made alive. The organ thus animated was called the soul.

"Man became a living soul" expresses not merely the fact that the combination of spirit and body produced the soul; it also suggests that spirit and body were completely merged in this soul. In other words, soul and body were combined with the spirit, and spirit and body were merged in the soul. Adam "in his unfallen state knew nothing of these ceaseless strivings of spirit and flesh which are matters of daily experience to us. There was a perfect blending of his three natures into one and the soul as the uniting medium became the cause of his individuality, of his existence as a distinct being." (Pember's Earth's Earliest Age) Man was designated a

living soul, for it was there that the spirit and body met and through which his individuality was known. Perhaps we may use an imperfect illustration: drop some dye into a cup of water. The dye and water will blend into a third substance called ink. In like manner the two independent elements of spirit and body combine to become living soul. (The analogy fails in that the soul produced by the combining of spirit and body becomes an independent, indissoluble element as much as the spirit and body.)

God treated man's soul as something unique. As the angels were created as spirits, so man was created predominantly as a living soul. Man not only had a body, a body with the breath of life; he became a living soul as well. Thus we find later in the Scriptures that God often referred to men as "souls." Why? Because what the man is depends on how his soul is. His soul represents him and expresses his individuality. It is the organ of man's free will, the organ in which spirit and body are completely merged. If man's soul wills to obey God, it will allow the spirit to rule over the man as ordered by God. The soul, if it chooses, also can suppress the spirit and take some other delight as lord of the man. This trinity of spirit, soul and body may be partially illustrated by a light bulb. Within the bulb, which can represent the total man, there are electricity, light and wire. The spirit is like the electricity, the soul the light, and body the wire. Electricity is the cause of the light while light is the effect of electricity. Wire is the material substance for carrying the electricity as well as for manifesting the light. The combination of spirit and body produces soul, that which is unique to man. As electricity, carried by the wire, is expressed in light, so spirit acts upon the soul and the soul, in turn, expresses itself through the body.

However, we must remember well that whereas the soul is the meeting-point of the elements of our being in this present life, the spirit will be the ruling power in our resurrection state. For the Bible tells us that "it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body" (I Cor. 15.44). Yet here

is a vital point: we who have been joined to the resurrected Lord can even now have our spirit rule over the whole being. We are not united to the first Adam who was made a living soul but to the last Adam Who is a life-giving spirit (v.45).

## RESPECTIVE FUNCTIONS OF SPIRIT, SOUL AND BODY

It is through the corporal body that man comes into contact with the material world. Hence we may label the body as that part which gives us world-consciousness. The soul comprises the intellect which aids us in the present state of existence and the emotions which proceed from the senses. Since the soul belongs to man's own self and reveals his personality, it is termed the part of self-consciousness. The spirit is that part by which we commune with God and by which alone we are able to apprehend and worship Him. Because it tells us of our relationship with God, the spirit is called the element of God-consciousness. God dwells in the spirit, self dwells in the soul, while senses dwell in the body.

As we have mentioned already, the soul is the meeting point of spirit and body, for there they are merged. By his spirit man holds intercourse with the spiritual world and with the Spirit of God, both receiving and expressing the power and life of the spiritual realm. Through his body man is in contact with the outside sensuous world, affecting it and being affected by it. The soul stands between these two worlds, yet belongs to both. It is linked with the spiritual world through the spirit and with the material world through the body. It also possesses the power of free will, hence is able to choose from among its environments. The spirit cannot act directly upon the body. It needs a medium, and that medium is the soul produced by the touching of the spirit with the body. The soul therefore stands between the spirit and the body, binding these two together. The spirit can subdue the body through the medium of the soul, so that it will obey God; likewise the body through the soul can draw the spirit into loving the world.

Of these three elements the spirit is the noblest for it joins with God. The body is the lowest for it contacts with matter. The soul lying between them joins the two together and also takes their character to be its own. The soul makes it possible for the spirit and the body to communicate and to cooperate. The work of the soul is to keep these two in their proper order so that they may not lose their right relationship --namely, that the lowest, the body, may be subjected to the spirit, and that the highest, the spirit, may govern the body through the soul. Man's prime factor is definitely the soul. It looks to the spirit to give what the latter has received from the Holy Spirit in order that the soul, after it has been perfected, may transmit what it has obtained to the body; then the body too may share in the perfection of the Holy Spirit and so become a spiritual body.

The spirit is the noblest part of man and occupies the innermost area of his being. The body is the lowest and takes the outermost place. Between these two dwells the soul, serving as their medium. The body is the outer shelter of the soul, while the soul is the outer sheath of the spirit. The spirit transmits its thought to the soul and the soul exercises the body to obey the spirit's order. This is the meaning of the soul as the medium. Before the fall of man the spirit controlled the whole being through the soul.

The power of the soul is most substantial, since the spirit and the body are merged there and make it the site of man's personality and influence. Before man committed sin the power of the soul was completely under the dominion of the spirit. Its strength was therefore the spirit's strength. The spirit cannot itself act upon the body; it can only do so through the medium of the soul. This we can see in Luke 1.46-47: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Darby). "Here the change in tense shows that the spirit first conceived joy in God, and then, communicating with the soul, caused it to give

expression to the feeling by means of the bodily organ." (Pember's Earth's Earliest Age)

To repeat, the soul is the site of personality. The will, intellect and emotions of man are there. As the spirit is used to communicate with the spiritual world and the body with the natural world, so the soul stands between and exercises its power to discern and decide whether the spiritual or the natural world should reign. Sometimes too the soul itself takes control over man through its intellect, thus creating an ideational world which reigns. In order for the spirit to govern, the soul must give its consent; otherwise the spirit is helpless to regulate the soul and the body. But this decision is up to the soul, for therein resides the personality of the man.

Actually the soul is the pivot of the entire being, because man's volition belongs to it. It is only when the soul is willing to assume a humble position that the spirit can ever manage the whole man. If the soul rebels against taking such a position the spirit will be powerless to rule. This explains the meaning of the free will of man. Man is not an automaton that turns according to God's will. Rather, man has full sovereign power to decide for himself. He possesses the organ of his own volition and can choose either to follow God's will or to resist Him and follow Satan's will instead. God desires that the spirit, being the noblest part of man, should control the whole being. Yet, the will---the crucial part of individuality---belongs to the soul. It is the will which determines whether the spirit, the body, or even itself is to rule. In view of the fact that the soul possesses such power and is the organ of man's individuality, the Bible calls man a living soul."

#### THE HOLY TEMPLE AND MAN

"Do you not know," writes the Apostle Paul, "that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor. 3.16) He has received revelation in likening man to the temple. As God formerly dwelt in the temple, so the Holy Spirit indwells man today. By comparing him to the temple we can see how the tripartite elements of man are distinctly manifested.

We know the temple is divided into three parts. The first is the outer court which is seen by all and visited by all. All external worship is offered here. Going further in is the Holy Place, into which only the priests can enter and where they present oil, incense and bread to God. They are quite near to God---yet not the nearest, for they are still outside the veil and therefore unable to stand before His very presence. God dwells deepest within, in the Holy of Holies, where darkness is overshadowed by brilliant light and into which no man can enter. Though the high priest does enter in once annually, it nonetheless indicates that before the veil is rent there can be no man in the Holy of Holies.

Man is God's temple also, and he too has three parts. The body is like the outer court, occupying an external position with its life visible to all. Here man ought to obey every commandment of God. Here God's Son serves as a substitute and dies for mankind. Inside is man's soul which constitutes the inner life of man and which embraces man's emotion, volition and mind. Such is the Holy Place of a regenerated person, for his love, will and thought are fully enlightened that he may serve God even as the priest of old did. Innermost, behind the veil, lies the Holy of Holies into which no human light has ever penetrated and no naked eye has ever pierced. It is "the secret place of the Most High," the dwelling place of God. It cannot be reached by man unless God is willing to rend the veil. It is man's spirit. This spirit lies beyond man's self-consciousness and above his sensibility. Here man unites and communes with God.

No light is provided for the Holy of Holies because God dwells, there. There is light in the Holy Place supplied by the lampstand of seven branches. The outer court stands under the broad daylight. All these serve as images and shadows to a regenerated person. His spirit is like the Holy of Holies indwelt by God,

where everything is carried on by faith, beyond the sight, sense or understanding of the believing

one. The soul resembles the Holy Place for it is amply enlightened with many rational thoughts and precepts, much knowledge and understanding concerning the things in the ideational and material world. The body is comparable to the outer court, clearly visible to all. The body's actions may be seen by everyone.

The order which God presents to us is unmistakable: your spirit and soul and body" (I Thess. 5.23). It is not soul and spirit and body," nor is it "body and soul and spirit." The spirit is the pre-eminent part, hence it is mentioned first; the body is the lowest and therefore is last mentioned; the soul stands between, so is mentioned between. Having now seen God's order, we can appreciate the wisdom of the Bible in likening man to a temple. We can recognize the perfect harmony which exists between the temple and man in respect to both order and value.

Temple service moves according to the revelation in the Holy of Holies. All activities in the Holy Place and in the outer court are regulated by the presence of God in the Holiest Place. This is the most sacred spot, the place upon which the four corners of the temple converge and rest. It may seem to us that nothing is done in the Holiest because it is pitch dark. All activities are in the Holy Place; even those activities of the outer court are controlled by the priests of the Holy Place. Yet all the activities of the Holy Place actually are directed by the revelation in the utter quietness and peace of the Holy of Holies.

It is not difficult to perceive the spiritual application. The soul, the organ of our personality, is composed of mind, volition and emotion. It appears as though the soul is master of all actions, for the body follows its direction. Before the fall of man, however, the soul, in spite of its many activities, was governed by the spirit. And this is the order God still wants: first the spirit, then the soul, and lastly the body.

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