

Spirit and Soul in Scripture

What is the difference between ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’? I have never been given an actual definitive answer to this question from any person I have ever asked. The best that has ever been offered is some nebulous, often while stuttering as they attempt to answer, even from pastors, about some sort of mystical ghost entity... Blah, blah, blah. No problem. I didn’t know the answer to this question at one point either... of course, I WAS TEN. Sorry, sometimes I can’t help the sarcasm. I’m working on it. In all honesty, I think we will only know all the answers when we get to that point of resurrection to judgment or the Kingdom. There are going to be some things that we will not understand completely and possibly not be able to harmonize. At that point we will just have to admit, we don’t know. We just keep on that quest for the knowledge of God’s truth... and keep searching for those answers.

So how do we find the answer? The Bible. NOT some dictionary, commentary, or pagan tradition, which is where the dictionaries and commentaries get their answers. We find our answers from the Bible itself. We find the absolute earliest Biblical reference with those terms and begin from there. The oldest book in the Bible is the book of Job. Genesis gives us our beginnings. So we should start with an exhaustive search of these two words from within these two books and find out how scripture defines these terms. Compare the usages and bang out a specific, definitive, scriptural definition of the terms. We will then have an understanding of all New Testament references containing these words.

If you will do that, you will find that what you have always believed these terms meant, in fact, do not mean what you thought they did. It will, in fact, “rock your world” to find out that you have been misled all of your life. Intentionally or unintentionally, only God knows. Let that sink in. Then open your Bible and you will find a whole new world.

Man’s spirit is the Breath of God, which is the “essence” of God, and gives us life (Genesis 2:7). And God retrieves that breath when we die (Ecclesiastes 12:7). You could use the analogy of a blueprint. God will use that blueprint (your spirit) for your specific and unique body. This is because the promise of everlasting life is through resurrection, NOT reincarnation, which is what most Christians believe and don’t even realize it. We will get to that problem some other time.

Below is an outline of these two terms with their actual biblical definitions. You should define all of your terms this way... heaven, hell, resurrection, life, etc. Follow the ‘Rules of Interpretation’. Get yourself a good Greek-Hebrew Interlinear, not just a Strong’s. Throw away your old presuppositions, and begin to see God’s instructions anew. Rightly. Those who endure to the end shall be saved.

Spirit – Breath – Wind “A Moving Current of Air”

1. Noun:

A. Used only of God and man (breath; spirit)

1. Hebrew: #H5397, נֶשֶׁם nesh’-am-ah

2. Greek: #G4157, πνοή (pno-A’)

B. Used generally (breath; wind; spirit) sometimes interchangeably with A.

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1. Hebrew: #H7307, רוּחַ ru'-ach
2. Greek: #G4151, πνεῦμα (pneu'-ma)
2. Literal Definition: “the elemental natural and vital force which, matter and process in one, acts as a stream of air in the blowing of the wind and the inhaling and exhaling of breath, and hence transferred as the breath of the spirit.” (TDNT Vol. VI, p. 334)
 - A. Always implies motion – a force that is always in action
3. God’s breath/spirit in man ...
 - A. comes out of God and is divine by nature: Genesis 2:7 “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 being.”
 - B. is God’s live connection to the man: Proverbs 20:27 “The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD, Searching all the inner depths of his heart.”
 - C. is continuously the source of life: Job. 33:4 “The Spirit of God has made me, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”
 - D. still is God’s possession: Job. 27:3 “As long as my breath is in me, And the breath of God in my nostrils.”
 - E. is what gives him consciousness and reason (setting him apart from animals): Job 32:8 “But there is a spirit in man, And the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.”
 - F. gives life to all, the righteous and the wicked: Isaiah 42:5 “Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread forth the earth and that which comes from it, Who gives breath to the people on it, And spirit to those who walk on it:”
 - G. is in the hand of the Lord who owns it: Daniel 5:23 “And you have lifted yourself up against the Lord of heaven. ... And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, bronze and iron, wood and stone, which do not see or hear or know; and the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns all your ways, you have not glorified.”
 - H. reanimates the body in the resurrection: Ezekiel 37:1-14
4. At death, God retrieves His “breath/spirit” from all men: Ecclesiastes 12:5-7 “Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it.”
5. Modified definition as related to man: “The spirit of man is the life-giving essence of God which continuously gives man self-awareness and the ability to reason, but is retrieved by God at death.”

Soul “A Breathing Creature”

(The Soul is the whole person and does NOT exist outside of the body. i.e. a ghost. There is ZERO reference in scripture where the soul is living outside of the body.)

1. Noun – derived from the verb “breathe” – a breathing creature (a breather)
 - A. Hebrew: #H5315, נֶפֶשׁ ne-phesh'
 - B. Greek: #G5590, ψυχή psy-kay'
2. Literal Definition: A breathing creature. “In Classical and post-classical Greek, ...[it is] the common idea of the soul as an immaterial or at least invisible essential core of man that can be thought of as distinct from the body. It gives worth and duration to the human self beyond the limits of physical existence. This idea is in every way alien to the Old Testament. ... In Isaiah 10:18 the total man is denoted by the double expression ‘soul / body,’ but in Greek this undoubtedly suggests that the two are in juxtaposition ... These words indicate only a slight distinction of meaning and not one that embraces the antithesis of body and soul.” (TDNT, Vol. IX, p. 632).

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A. The idea of the soul as completely distinct from the body was the basis for the “immortal soul” and “reincarnation” concepts of Plato.

3. Use in the Old Testament:

A. When God breathed into man’s body the “breath of life,” that body became a “living soul.” Gen. 2:7 “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 being [soul {nephesh}].”

B. Animals are “souls”: Gen. 1:20-21,24 “Then God said, ‘Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures [souls {nephesh}], and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.’ So God created great sea creatures and every living thing [soul {nephesh}] that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ... Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth the living creature [soul {nephesh}] according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind’; and it was so.”

C. The soul can be physically abused: Job. 7:15 “So that my soul chooses strangling And death rather than my body.” (see also: Psalm 143:3;

D. The soul goes to the grave: Psalm 44:25 “For our soul is bowed down to the dust; Our body clings to the ground.” (Hebrew parallelism – second clause restates the first clause). See also, Psalm 16:9-10; Psalm 30:3; Psalm 49:15

E. A soul can “flee” Psalm 11:1 “In the LORD I put my trust; How can you say to my soul, ‘Flee as a bird to your mountain?’”

F. The soul dies: Ezek. 18:4,20 “Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father As well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul who sins shall die. ... The soul who sins shall die.”

4. Modified Definition in relation to man (as distinct from animals): “A whole living person, in whom is God’s ‘breath of life’.”

A. This definition, from the bible alone, gives us these conclusions:

Conclusions from “Nephesh” (Soul)

1. Strong’s Definition: Nephesh – “properly, a breathing creature, i.e. animal of (abstractly) vitality”

A. From the verb naphash – “to breathe”

2. Original precedent from Gen. 1

A. Literally – a living moving creature (with evidence of being alive) (vss. 20, 21, 24).

B. Abstractly – the essence of being alive (evidenced by breathing and moving) (vs. 30).

3. Adam’s body of dust became a “living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Must be understood from past usage in ch. 1

4. “Soul” is in the blood (Gen. 9:4, 5; Lev. 17:11)

5. “Soul” refers to a physical living animal (Gen. 9:10,12,15,16)

6. “Soul” refers to physical persons (Gen. 12:5; Gen. 36:6; Ex. 1:5)

7. “Souls” may be spared from death (Gen. 12:13; Gen. 19:19,20; Gen. 32:30)

8. A “soul” can be sent into exile (Gen. 17:14)

9. Death is spoken of as the “soul” departing (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21-22)

10. “Soul” is a formerly living person that can be touched (Lev. 21:10-12; Num. 6:6; Num. 19:11, 13)

11. “Soul” is equated with flesh (Job 2:4, 6)

12. “Soul” is equated with physical life or lifespan (Job 6:11)

13. A “soul” can be strangled (Job 7:15)

14. Death is described as losing one’s soul (Job 31:39)

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15. The “soul” is buried in the grave (Job 33:22)
16. No cases in the OT where a “soul” outlives the body

“Soul” in the New Testament after getting definition for Old Testament passages alone.

I. In the OT, “soul” has the following meanings:

- A. A living physical person (human being)
- B. Animals
- C. The essence of “life” (as in the blood)
- D. A body (sometimes a dead body)
- E. A metaphor for emotions
- F. No clear case where “soul” refers to a ghost (a non-material conscious being living apart from the body)

II. Soul in the New Testament:

- A. A living physical person: Matt. 6:25; Matt. 11:29; Luke 12:19-20; Acts 2:41; Acts 3:23; 1 Cor. 15:45
- B. Animals: Rev. 8:9; Rev. 16:3
- C. The essence of “life”: Matt. 2:20; Matt. 10:39; Matt. 16:25-26; Mark 3:4; Luke 21:19; John 13:37-38; Acts 20:10
- D. A body: Matt. 20:28; Luke 12:22-23
 1. Jesus’ flesh: Matt. 20:28; John 10:11, 15, 17; John 15:13; 1 John 3:16
- E. A metaphor for emotions: Matt. 12:18; Matt. 22:37; Matt. 26:38; Luke 1:46; Luke 2:35
- F. Special cases to be discussed: Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 4:12; 3 John 1:2; Rev. 6:9; Rev. 20:4 [body σῶμα G4983]
- G. Salvation of the “soul” is future (resurrection): Hebrews 10:39; James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:9

Souls Under the Altar (Rev. 6:9-11)

1. The Martyrs:

- A. These “souls” represent all the martyrs – (cf. Rev. 20:1-4)
- B. Abel was the first martyr; his blood cries out to be avenged – (Gen. 4:10)
- C. Abel is the “father” of martyrs – (Luke 11:46-51)
- D. Abel still speaks today – (Heb. 11:4)

2. The “souls”:

- A. The “soul” (life) is the blood – (Lev. 17:11, 14)
- B. “Soul” (blood) poured out under the altar – (Lev. 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34; Lev. 5:9)

3. Interpretation:

- A. Abel and all those who followed him (killed for their testimony)
- B. Abel’s blood (soul) crying out to be avenged has become a huge throng.
- C. God has not forgotten them, He will avenge them.
- D. There are a more to be martyred.
- E. All will receive “white robes” and be resurrected.
- F. This allegory is meant to encourage potential martyrs in the last days.
- G. The martyrs resurrected and reigning with Christ – (Rev. 20:1-4)