

# WAY TO SHILOH

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## The Mysterious Nature of a Soul

(Extract from 'THE FAITH' by Dr Peter Masters)

***Man has a soul of vast desires  
And burns within the restless fires.***

We begin this overview of great Christian truths with a look at the *creature* rather than the Creator, because, while God is obviously infinitely greater and more glorious, man was created to be unique on earth, possessing an eternal soul with remarkable properties. Man is the zenith, the very highest point, of God's creative activity. There can be no greater tragedy, and no greater darkness, than men and women who live through life unaware of their status and capacities in God's plan and purpose. A clear knowledge of the human constitution provides an essential foundation for understanding life, and also spurs people to seek after the eternal God.

If secular society retained even the smallest realisation of the unique nature of man there would be no devaluing of people to the level of higher animals, no scrapping of moral values, and far less indifference to the Creator.

The authoritative word about the soul is to be found in 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 soul.' Here the distinctive nature of human beings is asserted, the body being formed from pre-existing matter, but the soul being breathed directly into the body by the power of God. Animals by contrast are very firmly said to have been brought forth from the earth only.<sup>(i)</sup>

Furthermore, man is exclusively said to be made 'in the image of God', and so he is pronounced superior to all animals.<sup>(ii)</sup>

Man, therefore consists of two 'elements', a body and a soul, the one being material and mortal, and the other immaterial and immortal.<sup>(iii)</sup> The soul is the *real* person, the distinct identity or personality. The Bible everywhere distinguishes between soul and body. Sometimes portraying the body as a garment for the soul, or as a tent of house in which the soul lives. The body will eventually be laid aside at death but the soul will retain eternally its consciousness and activity,<sup>(iv)</sup> to be either with God in heaven or banished from His presence.<sup>(v)</sup>

In the Bible the soul is the organ of rational thought, and the seat of a person's emotions and will. Because the soul is not material, you cannot see it by dissecting the body or the brain, although it uses the brain. Secularist sneer at the idea of a soul, claiming that all human thought and activity is entirely produced by chemical processes in the brain. They say that the notion of a soul is an invention of ancient times when people did not know about the role of brain cells. However, it has

always been understood that the brain is the means by which the soul functions, the 'operations room' of the soul, because even the ancients knew that if someone received a really hard crack on the head he would be concussed, becoming confused at the least, and possibly never quite the same again. They realised that the soul required the brain in order to relate to the material world.

The soul, however, is more than the brain, embracing as we have already noted the mind, will and emotions, along with the personality and 'spirit'; the last is a person's potential for spiritual activity. The soul uses the brain just as a musician uses an instrument to make music. This is why some features of personality are inherited, because the brain as an instrument resembles that of the parents. However, according to Scripture, there is an independent personality – a soul – behind the brain, and no two people are ever the same, nor do they react in exactly the same way in any situation.<sup>(vi)</sup> The secularist says there is no independent person or mind resident in one's head, only a complex computer, but the Bible holds up the human soul as unique in the animal kingdom, and accountable to its Creator.

The start of one's life is the beginning of history of an eternal, never dying soul, there has been no pre-existence for the soul. Because God is described as the 'Father of spirits',<sup>(vii)</sup> we understand that the soul is created directly by Him at the outset of life. Our bodies, therefore, are derived from our earthly parents, but our souls from God.

The soul is not in any way an extension of God, or made of the divine essence, for it is a created thing. A person's soul or spirit is distinguished from that of an angel's because it has been designed to be united with a body, whereas angels are spirits created without bodies.

What exactly can the soul do? The range of abilities given in every human soul is astonishing, and for this reason anyone who does not understand and appreciate his soul has missed the whole point of his existence. In these next pages we list the abilities or departments or faculties of the soul, five in all.

### **Five Faculties of the Soul**

1. The first faculty of the soul is the mind and the reason, which enables people to know, think and imagine; to understand moral precepts; to weigh the pros and cons of any situation; and to plan. Here is wisdom unique to the human race.<sup>(viii)</sup>

2. The second faculty is the will, by which all the choices are exercised and implemented and a person determines to act in any given way. The will is the 'executive arm' of the soul.<sup>(ix)</sup>

3. The third faculty of the soul is the emotional part, also called the affections or the feelings. Many Christian writers include this faculty with the mind, but we give it a separate heading in line with the three faculties of the soul mentioned in Proverbs 3.5-6, namely the heart (emotions), the understanding (mind) and the ways (will). The emotions respond to or endorse whatever is considered by the mind, and also to situations and events, and include a person's tastes and desires. The capacity for happiness, delight, sorrow, compassion, and love is frequently mentioned in Scripture.<sup>(x)</sup>

The emotions should ideally be governed by the mind, but they can charge off on their own, rather as a drunkard or drugged person may act without rational control. Since the fall of man, the affections have been corrupted and inclined to seek satisfaction in bodily desires and lusts, and selfish ends.<sup>(xi)</sup>

To summarise so far, the powers of faculties of the soul are the mind, the will and the emotions, but there two further faculties of vital importance. None of the three aspects of the soul just reviewed are seen in animals except in a very simple, limited way, and ties to animal's instincts. Having no soul, animals have no power of reason, no freedom of choice and no refinement of feeling. Any limited appearance of these abilities is related to an animal's instinctual need of provision and survival. Rudimentary affection or loyalty, for example, is merely expressions of – 'the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib'.

4. The fourth faculty of the soul shines a light over the first three because it is the voice of God's law in the soul, the *conscience*, a resident magistrate within. Solomon called it the lamp of the Lord searching all the inward parts.<sup>(xii)</sup> The *conscience* works in the mind to stir moral awareness and to accuse or excuse all that is done.<sup>(xiii)</sup> The mind (first faculty we listed) is already stamped with the moral law of God, having an intuition to know right and wrong, and the conscience stands along side the mind, much as police and magistrates monitor the behaviour of society. Speaking to the mind (and through the mind to the emotions) the conscience causes either pain or pleasure as it reacts to the thoughts and schemes of the mind, and the actions of the will. This twofold knowledge of God's

standards is most carefully set out by Paul, who says (first) that people show the law written in their hearts, the (secondly) conscience also bears witness, giving judgement on their deeds.<sup>(xiii)</sup>

The conscience may be trampled down and rendered insensible by human determination to sin. It is therefore infallible, and if willingly re-programmed will become a perverted and deceiving conscience.<sup>(xiv)</sup> However it is indestructible and will always react righteously to some degree even in the most depraved person, because God's standard can never be entirely eradicated.<sup>(xv)</sup> Needless to say a conscience is not seen in animals.

5. The fifth power or faculty of the soul should really be given first place because it stands high above the others, enabling people to fulfil the glorious purpose of their creation – that of interacting with their God. It is the faculty of spiritual communion, the ability to speak to the Lord in prayer and praise. This power of the soul is referred to in the Bible by the word spirit. The terms soul and spirit are largely interchangeable in the New Testament,<sup>(xvi)</sup> both of them describing the soul, but each term having a distinctive purpose. The term soul refers to the whole soul (all its faculties) whereas the term spirit speaks specifically of the power of the soul to engage in spiritual participation with God.

Is it right to say that the spirit is dead in people who have no walk with God, and do not communicate with Him? In one sense it is,<sup>(xvii)</sup> but because people are responsible for their own sin we equally say that their spirits are inactive. Just as it may be said of someone that he has a brain and will not use it, so it may be said of he who has a soul but will not pray.

Equipped with the soul, man is seen to be created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>(xviii)</sup> Because God has no body, man can only resemble God in terms of his soul and all its capabilities, namely the power of reason, the power of decision, sophisticated emotions, moral consciousness, and the potential for spiritual interaction. By our souls we reflect our Creator, however faintly.

### **How Much Does Man Still Reflect God?**

By man's disobedience and fall in the Garden of Eden, and through the corruption of his nature, the image of God in him has been greatly spoiled, yet he continues to bear surviving features of his created glory. One great writer put it in these words: 'The soul's essence is preserved, though it has been robbed of its heavenly adornments.' Only Jesus Christ the Lord perfectly reflected on Earth the glory of God,<sup>(xix)</sup> and converted people are so changed that they begin to improve as image-bearers, and eventually enter Heaven instantly made perfect by divine power.<sup>(xx)</sup>

Bearing in mind the powers and faculties of the soul, we know that every person, converted or unconverted, continues to be in the image of God, however imperfectly, in the ten following ways: -

- (1) He or she is a personal being with individual conscious existence and power of action.
- (2) He possesses the mental power to think about all things in the world around him. He has, in other words, the gift of reason; the thinking, reflecting, planning faculty.
- (3) He possesses the power of choice between alternatives, which marks him out as a free agent (although now so often dominated by earthly and physical desires which please him). He is not subject to mere animal instincts, but can choose between them.
- (4) He possesses a moral consciousness and awareness (the remains of his original holy nature) augmented by a conscience, which calls out, 'I ought to do this', or 'I ought not'.
- (5) He possesses, despite the fall, traces and remains of moral virtues, together with some ability to regulate his outward behaviour in life. For this reason he has no excuse for sin. He has lost, however, his natural and willing obedience to all God's law.
- (6) He possessed perpetual existence, or immortality, in his soul, this immortality being supplied and sustained by God. Eternal existence is not the same as eternal life, however, because at the time of physical death the soul may be sentenced to exist eternally in a state of spiritual death. In other words it may be ever existent in hell.
- (7) He possesses also, despite the fall, a measure of dominion over other creatures, a glory given to him in Eden as a reflection of God's dominion. So he reflects God by possessing (above other creatures) unique attributes and dignity.
- (8) He still possesses since the fall a remaining natural, instinctual awareness of God, along with an ability to see God's power and Godhead in creation.
- (9) He still possesses since the fall a considerable measure of the inclination to love and relate to other fellow-creatures in a feelingful way, for he continues to be, like God, a 'relational' being. He desires love and relationships, and, uniquely among creatures, he is capable of language. Though hostility has become deeply embedded in his nature through the fall, there powerful indications remain of his being created in God's likeness.

(10) He still possesses, after the fall, the capacity for intelligent happiness and delight. Unlike animals, his intelligence is a creative, inventive intelligence, able to design and carry out innovations of great complexity and beauty. However, man has lost (through sin) the intense happiness and glory of finding his greatest delight in God.

As we consider these things, do we appreciate the uniqueness of our human nature, and the privilege of being image-bearers of the Creator? Do we realise our potential for spiritual communion with God, which is the ultimate purpose of life? Are we aware that we must one day give account to God for how we have stewarded our most precious possession – the soul? Surely the greatest responsibility in life is to seek and find the Lord, to learn of Him and serve Him, and so to fulfil the profound words of an historic catechism – ‘The chief end of man is the glorify and to enjoy Him for ever.’

Through sin we have been cut off from communion with the almighty God, through Christ’s atoning work alone can we be restored.

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(i) Genesis 1.24; 2.19

(ii) Genesis 1.26-28

(iii) Matthew 10.28; 16.26; 1 Corinthians 15.53; 2 Corinthians 5.4

(iv) 2 Corinthians 5.1-8; Genesis 2.7; Genesis 3.19; Ecclesiastes 12.7

(v) Matthew 25.21, 34, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1.7-10; 2 Timothy 4.8

(vi) Psalm 139.14.16 breathes the individuality of God’s fashioning of people

(vii) Hebrews 12.9

(viii) Proverbs 3.5; Matthew 22.37; Romans 7.25; Philippians 2.5; 2 Timothy 1.7

(ix) 1 Corinthians 7.37; 2 Corinthians 8.3; Philippians 2.13

(x) E.g.: the NT ‘bowels’ text’s where the spleen is an organ is a figure of deep feelings of tender love, mercy, compassion, etc. Philippians 2.1; Colossians 3.12; Philemon 7; 1 John 3.17; See also Deuteronomy 33.29; Psalm 128.1-2; Psalm 144.15

(xi) Ephesians 2.3; 1 Peter 2.11

(xii) Proverbs 20.27

(xiii) Romans 2.14-15

(xiii) Romans 2.14-15

(xiv) 1 Timothy 4.2; Hebrews 9.14

(xv) John 8.9

(xvi) In two texts – 1 Thessalonians 5.23 and Hebrews 4.12 – they are mentioned together (‘spirit and soul’ and ‘soul and spirit’)

(xvii) Ephesians 2.1

(xviii) Genesis 1.26-27

(xix) Colossians 1.15; 2 Corinthians 4.4

(xx) Romans 8.29; 2 Corinthians 3.18