

SUMMARY: The “spirit” is the part of us which is not susceptible of death and which survives the dissolution of the body. The “soul” is a generic word which means spirit, person, animal life, and/or the intellectual nature of man.

The following is an article in the March 20, 1980 issue of “Gospel Advocate”:

“What is the difference between the soul and the spirit of man?”

Though it is characteristic of most people today to use these terms interchangeably the scriptures very definitely differentiate them. “For the word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12). Since the sacred writers provided for “the dividing of soul and spirit,” in those instances where they differ, so ought we and so we must if we are to entertain biblical concepts of these words.

The word, “spirit,” when denoting the human entity (from the Greek word pneuma), is a specific term and designates that part of us which is not susceptible of death and which survives the dissolution of the body. (Acts 7:59). It is infused in us directly from God and is not a product of human generation. (Hebrews 12:9). “Soul,” from the Greek word psuche, however, is a generic word and its meaning must be determined in any given instance, from the context in which it appears. Were I, in conversation with you, to use the word apple you are at once able to conjure up in mind the fruit by this name and you are not dependent on my usage of the word to ascertain its meaning. But, were I to ask, “Define the word bark for me,” you could not possibly know whether I mean by it the sound a dog makes or the outer covering of a tree! However, should I say, “Bark is thicker this winter than usual,” you are able with ease to gather the meaning of the term from the context in which I have used it.

Similarly, were you to ask, “Define the human spirit for me,” I can at once and correctly say to you, “It is the immortal nature – that portion of us derived directly from God, and not subject to death.” But, when you ask, “What is the biblical significance of the word soul?” I must respond by asking, “What passage of scripture do you have in mind in your reference to the soul?” since it is used in four different senses in the sacred writings:

1. As a synonym for person: “And there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls.” (Acts 2:41). Wherein few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water,” (1 Peter 3:20).
2. To denote the animal life which man possesses in common with the beasts of the field and which is lost in death: “He spared not their soul from death, but gave their life over to the pestilence...” (Psalm 78:50). By this it is simply meant that they were suffered to die. Their soul was their physical life.

3. The intellectual nature in contrast with the higher spiritual nature and the lower physical nature. "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God..." (1 Corinthians 2:14). The "natural man" of this passage being literally, the soulish man, since the adjective "natural" translates a form of the Greek word for soul, which may be expressed in English as psychical. Thus, this usage is supported by etymology and required by the context. See, especially, Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1:18-28 and 2:6-16.
4. As a synonym for the never-dying spirit: "Because thou wilt not leave my soul unto Hades, neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption." (Acts 2:27). Here it is obvious that the word soul signifies the immortal nature; that entity of the Lord which was not to undergo death.

It will be seen from this induction of biblical teaching that there is no pat and easy answer to the question, What is the soul? Since any proper reply must take into account the significance intended by the inspired penman who used it. It is not unusual for shrewd materialists (among whom are "Jehovah's Witnesses," Adventists, and Christadelphians) to induce an uninformed person in these matters to affirm that "the soul never dies," and then to produce numerous statements from the Old Testament that the soul does indeed die, the conclusion then being pressed that man is wholly mortal, his entire being subject to death. The argument is a fallacious one and the conclusion is false because it results from the assignment of a specific meaning to a generic term where such was not the intent of the Old Testament writer. The spirit of man is not subject to death (Genesis 25:8; 35:18; Psalm 90:10; Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 5:1, 6-8); it is the spirit leaving the body which constitutes death (James 2:26); and in any instance when death is affirmed of some part of us, it does not embrace the spirit – the immortal nature.

- Guy N. Woods, Associate Editor