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Soul Sleep

The Watchtower, April 15, 1973, p. 231

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Is This Life All There Is?, 1974 ed., p. 5

“The Scriptural evidence is unmistakably clear that man does not have an immortal soul but is himself a soul.”

Reasoning from the Scriptures, 1985 ed., p.375

“Definition: In the Bible, ‘soul’ is translated from the Hebrew *ne’phesh* and the Greek *psy·khe’*. Bible usage shows the soul to be a person or an animal or the life that a person or an animal enjoys. To many persons, however, ‘soul’ means the immaterial or spirit part of a human being that survives the death of the physical body. Others understand it to be the principle of life. But these latter views are not Bible teachings.”

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**Knowledge That Leads to Everlasting Life, 1995
ed., p. 80-81**

“The ancient Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato held that there must be something inherently immortal inside man and woman—a soul that survives death and never really dies. Earth wide, millions believe this today. This belief often engenders as much fear of the dead as it does concern for their welfare. The Bible teaches us something quite different about the dead.”

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life of an individual, conscious subject."
—*New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

"In the New Testament, to 'save one's soul' (*Mk* 8:35) does not mean to save some 'spiritual' part of man, as opposed to his 'body' (in the Platonic sense) but the whole person with emphasis on the fact that the person is living, desiring, loving and willing, etc., in addition to being concrete and physical."—*The New American Bible, "Glossary of Biblical Theology Terms."*

"The Bible does not say we have a soul. 'Nefesh' is the person himself, his need for food, the very blood in his veins, his being."
—Dr. H. M. Orlinsky of Hebrew Union College, quoted in *New York Times*, October 12, 1962.

As the original-language words for "soul" (*ne'phesh* and *psykhe*) can refer to man himself, we should expect to find the normal physical functions or characteristics of humans attributed to it. Is this the case? Is your soul really you? Consider:

A study of the Bible's use of these Hebrew and Greek words reveals that a human soul is born. (*Gen.* 46:18) It can eat or fast. (*Lev.* 7:20; *Ps.* 35:13) It can be joyful or sorrowful. (*Ps.* 35:9; *Matt.* 26:38) It can fall in love. (*Gen.* 34:3) It can bless others. (*Gen.* 27:4) It can listen. (*Acts* 3:23) The soul can sin, swear, crave things and give way to fear. (*Lev.* 4:2; 5:4; *Deut.* 12:20; *Acts* 2:43) It can be kidnapped and put in irons. (*Deut.* 24:7; *Ps.* 105:18) Are not all these things that *you* can do or that can be done to *you*? Yes, your soul is you.

So when your soul dies, you die, you cease to have conscious existence. The Bible repeatedly speaks of the soul as dying. Through his prophet Ezekiel, Jehovah declared: "Look! All the souls—to me they belong. As the soul of the father so likewise the soul of the son—to me they belong. The soul that is sinning—it itself will die." (*Ezek.* 18:4, 20) Respecting the Messiah or Christ, the prophecy of Isaiah foretold: "He poured out his soul to the very death." (*Isa.* 53:12) And Jesus Christ

said: "He that is fond of his soul destroys it."—*John* 12:25.

But are there not at least some scriptures that could be understood as suggesting the possibility of man's having an immortal soul? No. Interestingly, even Bible scholars who are not Jehovah's witnesses have reached this conclusion on the basis of their study. Writing in *Presbyterian Life* (May 1970), David G. Buttrick, Associate Professor in Church and Ministry, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, states: "I find nothing in Scripture to back up the idea that souls have 'an immortal subsistence.'" Regarding the significance of the word "soul," this scholar observes: "When the Bible does use that word *soul*, it usually means 'life' or 'livingness,' and not some separate part of us. So think it out: When the Bible tells us we are mortal, it is saying that we die—we really die." Continuing his line of argument, he says: "If we had immortal souls, we wouldn't need God—our immortality would do the trick. But the Bible contradicts such vain hope: we are mortal and so we must cling to God's love alone. Christians do not believe in continuation, but in resurrection."

The Bible makes it plain that there is no conscious existence in the death state. *Ecclesiastes* 9:10, according to the rendering of the Roman Catholic *Douay Version*, reads: "Whatsoever thy hand is able to do, do it earnestly: for neither work, nor reason, nor wisdom, nor knowledge, shall be in hell, whither thou art hastening." There being no immortal soul to survive the death of the body, there is nothing that can be tormented after death in a fiery hell.

God's promise of a resurrection, however, gives assurance that the dead in hell will come to life. Just what is this hell and how can the dead be released from its grip? Please consider the next article.

been dishonest in his teaching? Who is right—the church or its scholars?

If the scholars are right in saying that the human soul is the entire person, including his fleshly body, we should expect the Bible to refer to the soul as being mortal. Does it? Yes. The Bible speaks of 'holding back,' 'rescuing' and 'saving' a *nephesh* or soul from death. (Psalm 78:50; 116:8; James 5:20) We also read: "Let us not strike his soul fatally." (Genesis 37:21) "The manslayer must flee there who fatally strikes a soul unintentionally." (Numbers 35:11) "Their soul will die in youth." (Job 36:14) "The soul that is sinning—it itself will die."—Ezekiel 18:4, 20.

But is it possible that at least in a few Scriptural references the original-language words rendered "soul" designate something that leaves the body at death and is immortal? What about such texts as the following? "As her soul was going out (because she died) she called his name Benoni" (Genesis 35:18) "My God, please, cause the soul of this child to come back within him." (1 Kings 17:21) "Stop raising a clamor, for his soul is in him." (Acts 20:10) Do not these passages indicate that the soul is something that exists independently of the body?

The text at Job 33:22, written in poetic style, provides a key to understanding these passages. There "soul" and "life" are placed in parallel, so that the two words could be interchanged without changing the sense of the passage. We read: "His soul crawls near to the pit, and his life to those inflicting death." From this parallel we can see that the word "soul" can mean life as a person and, therefore, the departure of the soul can be

understood to refer to the end of life as a person.

To illustrate: A man might say that his dog 'lost its life' when it was hit by a truck. Does he mean that this animal's life left the body and continued existing? No, he is simply using a figure of speech indicating that the animal died. The same is true when we speak of a man as 'losing his life.' We do not mean that his life exists independently of the body. Similarly, 'to lose one's soul' means 'to lose one's life as a soul' and carries no meaning of continued existence after death. Recognizing this, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states:

"The 'departure' of the *nephesh* [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it (Num. 31:19; Judg. 16:30; Ezek. 13:19). No biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death."

THE SOURCE OF THE BELIEF

The Scriptural evidence is unmistakably clear that man does not have an immortal soul but is himself a soul. How, then, did this belief about an immortal soul find its way into the teachings of Christendom's churches? Today it is frankly acknowledged that this has come about through the influence of pagan Grecian philosophy. Writes Professor Douglas T. Holden in his book *Death Shall Have No Dominion*:

"Christian theology has become so fused with Greek philosophy that it has reared individuals who are a mixture of nine parts Greek thought to one part Christian thought."

The Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, in its issue of January 15, 1971, confessed that the idea of an immortal soul was a concept that "the late

thing, therefore, was for Adam to reflect God's holy qualities, to respond appreciatively to God's direction. To fall short of this was to miss the mark, to sin. See Romans 3:23, also 1 Peter 1:14-16.)

Eph. 2:1-3: "It is you [Christians] God made alive though you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you at one time walked according to the system of things of this world, according to the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit that now operates in the sons of disobedience. Yes, among them we all at one time conducted ourselves in harmony with the desires of our flesh, doing the things willed by the flesh and the thoughts, and we were naturally children of wrath even as the rest." (As offspring of sinner Adam, we were born in sin. From birth on, the inclination of our heart is toward badness. If we do not curb those wrong tendencies, we may in time become accustomed to such a way of life. It may even seem "normal" because others around us are doing similar things. But the Bible identifies what is right and what is wrong from God's viewpoint, in view of how he made man and his purpose for mankind. If we listen to our Creator and lovingly obey him, life will take on a richness of meaning that we never knew before, and we will have an eternal future. Warmly our Creator invites us to taste and see how good it is.—Ps. 34:8.)

How does sin affect a person's relationship with God?

1 John 3:4, 8: "Everyone who practices sin is also practicing lawlessness, and so sin is lawlessness. He who carries on sin originates with the Devil." (How forceful this is! Those who deliberately choose a course of sin, making a practice of it, are viewed by God as criminals. The course they have chosen is the one that Satan himself first took.)

Rom. 5:8, 10: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . When we were enemies, we became reconciled to God through the death of his Son." (Notice that sinners are referred to as enemies of God. How wise, then, to avail ourselves of the provision that God has made for reconciliation to him!)

1 Tim. 1:13: "I was shown mercy [says the apostle Paul], because I was ignorant and acted with a lack of faith." (But when he was shown the right way by the Lord, he did not hold back from following it.)

2 Cor. 6:1, 2: "Working together with him, we also entreat you not to accept the undeserved kindness of God and miss its purpose. For he says: 'In an acceptable time I heard you, and in a day of salvation I helped you.' Look! Now is the especially acceptable time. Look! Now is the day of salvation." (Now is the time when the opportunity for salvation is available. God will not forever extend toward sinful humans such undeserved kindness. So, care needs to be exercised in order that we do not miss its purpose.)

How is relief from our sinful state possible?

See the main heading "Ransom."

Soul

Definition: In the Bible, "soul" is translated from the Hebrew *ne'phesh* and the Greek *psyche*. Bible usage shows the soul to be a person or an animal or the life that a person or an animal enjoys. To many persons, however, "soul" means the immaterial or spirit part of a human being that survives the death of the physical body. Others understand it to be the principle of life. But these latter views are not Bible teachings.

What does the Bible say that helps us to understand what the soul is?

Gen. 2:7: "Jehovah God proceeded to form the man out of dust from the ground and to blow into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man came to be a living soul." (Notice that this does not say that man was given a soul but that he became a soul, a living person.) (The part of the Hebrew word here rendered "soul" is *ne'phesh*. *KJ*, *AS*, and *Dy* agree with that rendering. *RS*, *JB*, *NAB* read "being." *NE* says "creature." *Kr* reads "person.")

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR DEAD LOVED ONES?

“ONE suffers when a loved one dies because death is a loss to a void beyond all understanding.” That is what one son said when his father and shortly thereafter his mother died. His pain and sense of deep loss made him feel that he was “drowning emotionally.” Perhaps you have suffered in a similar way. You may have wondered where your loved ones are and whether you will ever see them again.

² Some grieving parents have been told, “God picks the most beautiful flowers to take to himself in heaven.” Is that really so? Have our dead loved ones gone to a spirit realm? Is it what some call Nirvana, described as a blissful state of being free of all pain and desire? Have those we love passed through a doorway to immortal life in paradise? Or as others claim, is death a fall into never-ending torment for those who have offended God? Can the dead affect our lives? To get truthful answers to such questions, we need to consult God’s Word, the Bible.

WHAT IS THE “SPIRIT” IN HUMANS?

³ The ancient Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato

1. How do people feel when death strikes a loved one?
2. What perplexing questions arise concerning death?
3. What opinion did Socrates and Plato have regarding the dead, and how does this affect people today?

held that there must be something inherently immortal inside man and woman—a soul that survives death and never really dies. Earth wide, millions believe this today. This belief often engenders as much fear of the dead as it does concern for their welfare. The Bible teaches us something quite different about the dead.

⁴ In considering the condition of the dead, we must remember that our original father, Adam, did not *have* a soul. He *was* a soul. In an awe-inspiring act of creation, God formed man—the soul—from the basic elements of the earth and then breathed into him “the breath of life.” Genesis 2:7 tells us: “Jehovah God proceeded to form the man out of dust from the ground and to blow into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man came to be a living soul.” Adam’s life was sustained by breathing. Yet, more than the blowing of air into man’s lungs was involved when God put the breath of life into Adam. The Bible speaks of “the force of life” that is active in earthly living creatures.—Genesis 7:22.

⁵ What is “the force of life”? It is the vital spark of life that God put into the lifeless body of Adam. This force was then sustained by the breathing process. But what is the “spirit” referred to at Psalm 146:4? That verse says of one who dies: “His spirit goes out, he goes back to his ground; in that day his thoughts do perish.” When the Bible writers used the word “spirit” in this way, they did not have in mind a disembodied soul that continues living after the body dies.

⁶ The “spirit” that departs from humans at death is the life force that originated with our Creator. (Psalm 36:9;

4. (a) What does Genesis tell us about the soul? (b) What did God put into Adam to make him alive?
- 5, 6. (a) What is “the force of life”? (b) What happens when the “spirit” mentioned at Psalm 146:4 ceases to animate the body?