PAUL'S THEOLOGY
Lesson 45
Paul's Anthropological Terms –
Soul

On November 18, 1978 the Saturday Night Live episode on NBC had a musical skit starring Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi as Jake and Elwood Blues singing a remake of the 1967 Sam and Dave song, "Soul Man." The characters went on to make a movie and a franchise, but the highlight for me was always the Saturday Night Live sketch. The rendition of the song was good, and the characters' dancing even better.

Do you ever wonder what Paul might have thought if he knew the words "soul man" being sung over and over contained the same word that Paul used repeatedly in his New Testament writings?[1] I doubt Paul would have recognized the word as the same. I'm not sure listening to "soul music" would have made the word recognizable either.

To better understand what Paul says, and does not say through his use of the word translated "soul," we will look at the Greek word, consider its usage in the Old Testament, in other Jewish writings, and in the Greek culture. We will then examine Paul's usages and to apply what we have learned to understand better both Paul and Scripture.

THE SOUL (*PSUCHE*)

We start our study considering the Greek word for "soul." The Greek word is 4 simple letters: *psuche*. Before one accuses me of not being able to count, we should remember that the Greek alphabet has a letter *psi* (ψ) which we put into English as "ps" and a letter *chi* (χ) that we put into English as "ch." So in Greek the four letters are ψυχη.

As non-Greek speakers, we might remember this better if we know that the Greek "u" is often pronounced, and even transliterated by some into the English letter "y." This helps us readily see that the Greek word "psuche" gives us the English root of "psyche" for "psychology" and other similar words.

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[1] Paul uses the Greek for "soul" thirteen times. He uses different forms of the word another five times.

The Old Testament

As we have learned throughout our studies, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and its sister language of Aramaic, not Greek. So when we look for Old Testament usage of the word *psuche* (soul) we are looking at the Greek translation of the Old Testament we call the "Septuagint" (abbreviated as "LXX" – the Latin numbers for "70" which is what the word "*septuagint*" means). Paul had the LXX at his disposal and used it often when quoting from the Old Testament.

As Paul read and studied his Old Testament in Greek, Paul would have come across the word *psuche* very often. We find it used over 750 times! It generally translates the Hebrew word rendered "soul" into English (*nephesh* – ֶנ ֶפשׁ) although it is occasionally used for the Hebrew word "spirit" (*ruach*) and "heart" (*lev*).
The word makes its first appearance in Genesis 2:7 which reads:

> Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

The English Standard translators have rendered the Greek *psuche* (the Hebrew *nephesh*) as "creature." It is an early indicator of the Hebrew idea that this word "is the usual term for a man's total nature, for what he is and not just what he has."[2]

We need to refrain from what is an inherent desire for some to divide man into component parts and pieces. Linguistic and theological scholars are nearly unanimous that the Old Testament teaches the unity of man. In other words, the Old Testament does not treat "soul" in a manner as a distinct constituent part of a person; it is rather the entire living person. We will deal with this more in the next lesson on the divisions of man (one, two, three, or more?) For this lesson, however, we need to note that one reason the word is used over and over in the Old Testament is its usefulness as a reference to the person.[3]

In related ways, the word takes the place of one's will and determination. It is a part of man's feelings and desires. In passages like Deuteronomy 12:20, we see the translators taking the Hebrew *nephesh* and translating it as "desire" (the Septuagint uses *psuche*):

> When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he has promised you, and you say, 'I will eat meat,' because you crave

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[2] Kittel, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1974) Vol. 9 at 620.

[3] For example, we see the word used in the phrase translated "dead body" in places like Numbers 6:6, 19:13, etc.

(*nephesh*/*psuche*) meat, you may eat meat whenever you desire
(*nephesh*/*psuche*).

In summary, the Old Testament teaching of the "soul" (*nephesh*) of man is one
that speaks of the human in a singular form. We are "souls" because we are living
beings. We have desires and a will because we are "alive;" we are "souls."

Other Jewish Writings

We saw in our studies on the word "flesh" that Paul often used his words in the
sense that his Jewish contemporary culture used them, in ways that supplemented
the Hebrew Old Testament usage. We look, therefore, at the contemporary Jewish
literature to see how the Greek *psuche* (soul) and Hebrew *nephesh* were used.

In these writings we begin to see a direct influence of the Greek concepts of
psuche (soul), which are quite different from that of the Old Testament. Many
times the *psuche* is used in ways virtually identical to the Old Testament. But
other times, the *psuche* (soul) is seen as a different constituent part of man in
opposition to the body or flesh. These writings set up the *psuche* as some invisible
core essence of a person, distinct from the body.

For example, in the writing we call *The Testament of Abraham* (written either at
the time of Paul or shortly thereafter) God sends his archangel Michael to
Abraham to inform him that his death draws near. (This was so Abraham could
arrange the disposition of his possessions). Death is posed as the time that
Abraham's *psuche* (soul) leaves his body and the "vain world" and comes to
reside before the Lord.[4]

This idea will get further expansion as we consider Greek thought on the *psuche*
momentarily, but we should note that this usage and idea is contrary to the Hebrew
concept of *nephesh.* As Kittel notes, "This idea is in every way alien to the OT."[5]

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[4] This book has a special interest to Christians because chapter 11 speaks of the gates into the
afterlife. One is "broad" and the other "strait and narrow." Many souls go through the broad gate
to their destruction and eternal punishment, but few find the narrow gate and are eternally saved.
Jesus used this same image in teaching righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13-
14). Likely the concept was prevalent at the time of Jesus and therefore a useful illustration and
teaching tool. Like Paul, Jesus spoke in words and analogies of his day that made sense to those
listening and learning.

[5] Kittel at 632.

Usage in Greek Thought and Culture

The Greek word *psuche* has a long heritage dating centuries and centuries before Paul and the New Testament. Homer (if he existed as a person) wrote his Greek works sometime between 1100 BC and 850 BC. Homer had the *psuche* (soul) as the life force of man that, upon death, escaped through the mouth and went to the underworld where it lived as a shadow of the person.

As Greek thought progressed, the *psuche* (soul) took on a more specialized meaning and role. By the time of Socrates and Plato the *psuche* (soul) became the moral seat and place of value in a person. By this time, we can call the study (Greek : "-ology") of this inside part of man an "ology" of the *psuche* or "*psuchology*." Along with this developing philosophy, the *psuche* was seen as pre-existing the human body and also indestructibly continuing after bodily death.

By the time of Paul, much of Greek thought placed the *psuche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit) and *nous* (mind) as all closely related parts of the unseen essence or core of a person. These parts were seen as valuable over and against the messy, sick, and temporal body where they temporarily "dwelt."

Again, as we noted before, this "psychology" of the human is distinct from that found in the Old Testament.

PAUL AND THE "SOUL" (*PSUCHE*)

At the outset, we must note that compared to the Old Testament, Paul rarely uses the word "soul." In our last lesson, we noted that Paul used the word "flesh" (*sarx*) 92 times, 28 in Romans alone. Paul uses soul (*psuche*) only 13 times, 18 if we count other forms of the word.

It is Paul's rare usage of the word that leads us to a most important lesson and consideration: What lessons can we learn from Paul's deviation from this constant Old Testament idea and word? To answer this question, we should first consider the passages where Paul wrote on the soul. Because they are so few, we will set out each one[6]:

- **Romans 2:9** "There will be tribulation and distress for every **human being** (*psuche*/soul) who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek"

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[6] We are leaving out here another important passage where Paul uses the word *apsuche* (αψυχη), which is the Greek prefix "a" attached to the word *psuche*. The Greek prefix "a" means "not." So the passage left out reads: "If even **lifeless** (*apsuche*"not soul") instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?" (1 Cor. 14:7). This passage further illustrates the points we make on Paul's usage of "soul."

- **Romans 11:2-3** "Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my **life** (*psuche*/soul).'"

- **Romans 13:1** "Let every **person** (*psuche*/soul) be subject to the governing authorities."

- **Romans 16:3-4** "Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my **life** (*psuche*/soul), to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well."

- **1 Corinthians 15:45** "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living **being** (*psuche*/soul)'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

- **2 Corinthians 1:23** "But I call God to witness against **me** (*psuche*/soul) — it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth."

- **2 Corinthians 12:15** "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your **souls** (*psuche*/soul). If I love you more, am I to be loved less?"

- **Ephesians 6:5-6** "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the **heart** (*psuche*/soul)"

- **Philippians 1:27** "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one **mind** (*psuche*/soul) striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

- **Philippians 2:29-30** "So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his **life** (*psuche*/soul) to complete what was lacking in your service to me."

- **Colossians 3:23** "Whatever you do, work **heartily** (*psuche*/soul), as for the Lord and not for men"

- **1 Thessalonians 2:8** "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own **selves** (*psuche*/soul), because you had become very dear to us."

- **1 Thessalonians 5:23** "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and **soul** (*psuche*/soul) and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

A casual reading through these passages brings one oddity to the forefront. Not only does Paul rarely use the Greek word "soul" (*psuche*), but when he does use it, the translators rarely translate it "soul." In fact, only twice does the English Standard Version render Paul's Greek *psuche* as "soul." Much more commonly the word is translated as "life" or some similar term.

At once we see consistency with Paul's usage and that of the Old Testament. For Paul, the word "soul" is a term that means the life of a person. In Romans 2:9, Paul speaks of the "soul," but means a "human being." Similarly, in Romans 13 Paul wants the entire person to be subject to the governing authority, and he uses the term "soul."

Several times Paul is actually quoting the Septuagint as he writes of the soul. These passages again show the consistency of usage between Paul and the Hebrew Scriptures in this vocabulary. Romans 11 is a quotation from 1 Kings 19 about Israel seeking Elijah's life ("soul"). Similarly in 1 Corinthians 15:45 Paul quotes the Genesis 2:7 passage we have in an earlier part of this lesson translated as Adam becoming a "living being" ("soul").

Some extra nuance is added to the word as Paul wrote the Colossians to work "heartily" ("soul") for the Lord rather than for men. Paul meant to give their whole human effort when they work, recognizing that the real reason they work is to fulfill God's call on their lives. As such, they work for God, regardless of who their human bosses might be.

This similar thought is found in Ephesians 6:5-6 where slaves were told to work for their masters as servants of Christ who are really fulfilling God's will with their lives or "from the heart (*psuche*/soul)."

When Paul spoke of willingness to give one's life (Rom.16:3-4; Phil. 2:29-20), to share his life (1 Thess. 2:8), or to sacrifice for the lives of others (2 Cor. 12:15) he used the word *psuche*/soul.

A review of Paul's usage brings the truth of Stacey's conclusion to the forefront:

> It is clear, therefore, that Paul is simply following the Old Testament usage. His ψυχη [*psuche*] is the נֶפֶשׁ [*nephesh*] of the Old Testament and the ψυχη [*psuche*] of the LXX [Septuagint].[7]

Bultmann set out the same conclusion:

> Just as Paul does not know the Greek-Hellenistic conception of the immortality of the soul (released from the body), neither does he use

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[7] Stacey, W. David, *The Pauline View of Man* (Macmillan 1956) at 124.

psyche [what we are transliterating as *psuche*] to designate the seat or the power of the mental life which animates man's matter, as it had become the custom to do among the Greeks. Rather, *psyche* in Paul means primarily the Old Testament נֶ֫פֶשׁ [*nephesh*] (rendered *psyche* in the LXX)—"vitality" or "life" itself.[8]

A BIG QUESTION

Reviewing Paul's usage of *psuche* leads one to a large question: Why does Paul use the word so rarely? As we noted earlier, the Old Testament has the word over 750 times, Greeks used the word prolifically, yet Paul (and the other New Testament writers also) use the word sparsely.

Paul does not tell us directly why the word is used so rarely, but a full reading of the terms we have studied so far give a good indication. For Paul, and indeed for the other Christian writers of the Bible, the emphasis for those born again was never the life that existed in common with other descendants of Adam. The "soul" or *psuche* that was the life or vitality of ordinary humanity was not the primary thought. The primary thought was, rather, the "Spirit" (and derivatively the human "spirit") which was the hallmark of the born again believer.

Spirit (*pneuma*) was how the Christian shared the indwelling of the Lord. It was the "Spirit" infused life that gave the Christian the fruits that changed behavior, mood, and values (Gal. 5:22-25). We refer back to our word study and lesson on the "spirit" for greater depth on this subject.[9]

Stacey sets out:

> In Christian experience, ψυχη [*psuche*] the term for purely human vitality became unimportant. πνευμα [*pneuma* – "spirit"] the term that began with God but proceeded into man, became central. The infrequency of the use of ψυχη [*psuche*] in Paul is the key to the understanding of it.

For Paul, religion and even theology was not so much about terms, and parts of the human being. For Paul the real questions and real points were about relationships. First and foremost in relationships was that of man and God. After that, and in fact from that, the issue of man's relationship with man arose. Paul's concerns

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[8] Bultmann, Rudolf, *Theology of the New Testament* (Baylor University reprint 2007) Vol. 1 at 203-204.

[9] See lesson on Paul's Theology number 41 available on the class website at www.Biblical-Literacy.com

were whether one knew God, whether that knowledge was appropriately changing one's life, both behavior and attitude, and whether one was walking in the Spirit of God.

We will see this more fully in our final lesson on Paul's anthropological terms next week.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living **being** (psuche/soul)'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."* (1 Cor. 15:45)

    Paul sets out the contrast here in a way that makes sense of his limited writing about the "soul" of man. We are, by birth and creation, people—alive and real. Yet that truth only sets the stage for the real opportunity! In Christ, we have a second source of being, a second "Adam." In Genesis we read that God took ground, fashioned man, breathed into him and produced a living, human being (*psuche*). But now in Christ God has done something new. God has produced into the living, human being a uniquely spiritual being. We are not the same. We are different. The born again believer has God dwelling within her/him. This changes the whole story. We have a different power, a different destiny, a different purpose, a different value system, and a different family! We are set apart from the world. In relationship with the Creator, we are uniquely his. This shouts a question: Can others see this? Does your life rest in this truth or does it still live in its old sense? May we commit anew to more carefully walking as Spirit filled believers and not simply the living beings we were as descendants of Adam.

2. *"Whatever, you do, work **heartily** (psuche/soul), as for the Lord and not for men"* (Col 3:23).

    When we consider the lives we lead on this earth, we see the perspective of living for God's purposes. That means that we are not only what God has made us to be, but that we do what God has made us to do. Gone is the idea that certain activities are "spiritual" as against others that are simply "normal." All activities are part of a born again believer's spiritual service to the Lord. So when we work at ordinary human jobs, we work with all that we are, because it is our service and mission before God. Whatever we set ourselves to, we do with all the effort we can empowered by and purposed by our Lord. The world will see a difference!

3.   *"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and **soul** (psuche/soul) and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Thess. 5:23).

We did not go into any depth on this verse in this lesson. It is our homework for next week. We finish considering whether Paul and Scripture teach that people are three parts (body, soul, spirit), two parts (inner man, outer man) or one part (fully human). As a Point for Home we are asked the question: what insight do we get on this 1 Thessalonians 5:23 passage from Deuteronomy 6:5 ("You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your soul and with all your might.")?