

Life, Soul, and Spirit

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This article deals with a great trinity of gospel terms, "life," "soul," and "spirit." It is important to discriminate between these terms, so that we may know what it is that abides in the body during life, what it is that leaves the body at death, and what is the state of the dead.

It is a remarkable fact that in the King James Version the word "soul" always represents the same word in the original Greek, *psuche*; but on the other hand, *psuche* is also translated "life" forty-one different times, as compared with "soul" sixty times. It is an equally remarkable fact that "life" represents the Greek word *zoe* a total of 125 times, and *psuche* 41 times, as stated above. This being the case, it becomes necessary to distinguish between the meaning of *zoe* and *psuche* in the original, and of "life" and "soul" in the translation.

Each of the Greek words comes from a different verbal root meaning "breathe," but usage has established a difference in import. Thus *zoe* names the act of breathing as an evidence of life, while *psuche* names it as an act of life, and *pneuma* (spirit) denotes the breathing as a means of life. From this we may deduce that *zoe* is life as an essence or principle, that *psuche* represents life as it is possessed and lived out from day to day, and that *pneuma* denotes the medium through which life does its work, and the quality of that work.

In actual usage in the New Testament, we find:

1. That *zoe* is invariably used to denote the inherent life of God, the inherent life of Christ, imparted life, and life everlasting or eternal. But *zoe* never denotes the life that Christ gave as a ransom for sinners. The word is found in many phrases, like "bread of life," "word of life," "tree of life," "book of life . . . crown of life," "water of life," "spirit of life," "gift of . . . life."
2. That *psuche* is used to denote natural life, life as it is lived from day to day, the whole being, and especially the mental and emotional life. It is invariably used to denote the life that Christ laid down as a ransom for sinners. It is found in many phrases like: "the young child's life", "take no thought for your life . . . lose his own soul," "in exchange for his soul," "give his life a ransom for many," "is not the life more than meat?" "lay down my life for the sheep," "an anchor of the soul," "He laid down his life for us," "My soul is exceeding sorrowful," "vexed his righteous soul from day to day," "eight souls were saved," "Shepherd . . . of your souls," "every living soul died in the sea," "loved not their lives unto the death," "as thy soul prospers."

Terms Variousy Rendered

It is easy to see that the same word *psuche* is variously rendered "life" and "soul," according as it fits our idiom better, but that in some places in which it is rendered "soul," it could as well be rendered "life," such as, "What shall a man give in exchange for his life [instead of soul]?" "Let every life [not soul] be subject unto the higher powers." "An anchor of the life [instead of soul]." "Shall save a life powers from death." "Eight lives were saved." "Saw under altar the lives of them."

The thing to be noted especially in this connection is that the Greek does not confuse the words "soul" and "spirit," as we do in English. The true word "spirit" (*pneuma*) is nowhere translated "soul" in the New Testament. It is often rendered Ghost or Holy Ghost, to use an Anglo-Saxon word instead of the Latin word "spirit," but nowhere "Soul," and in only one instance "life," in which instance it could as well read, "had power to give breath unto the image of the beast," to make it alive and active, just as God breathed breath into Adam's nostrils and he became a living being. In fact, *pneuma* is rendered "wind" in John 3:8, first part, and "Spirit" in the last part. It is this ethereal thing *pneuma* that believers in immortality of 'the soul' confuse with *psuche*, the true word for soul, when they talk about immortal souls or the departed spirits of the dead, which in reality are nothing more than their departed breaths. The Bible tells us that God imparted breath to Adam to make him alive, and that when he or any other man died, his breath returned to God who gave it, without being anything essentially different from what it was when God imparted it to man.

To sum up, it may truthfully be said

1. That "soul" is a proper word to use for the natural life-the whole being, or especially the mind and emotional part of natural man.

2. That it cannot be properly applied to the breath or spirit that departs at death.

3. That from the human standpoint "spirit" is a proper word to use for the natural breath (the Greek uses it for even the natural air). For the quality of man's mind and heart while he lives, and for the breath that departs at death and returns to God, who gave it.

4. That "spirit" cannot properly denote an entity that leaves the body at death, retaining its personality and continuing to live an endless life. The spirit of man is natural and mortal, as the spirit of God is divine and immortal, eternal.

5. That "life" is plainly used in two basic senses—the principle of life that gives and maintains being, and life as it is lived out in human existence. In the first instance, it may and should be called "life." In the second it may, in our idiom, be properly called either "life" (in the second sense) or "soul." The first belongs to God, and the second belongs, as a gift of God, to man. The first has no existence apart from God, and the second has no existence apart from man. There is therefore no such thing as soul distinct and apart from man, either before or after death.

What life is it, then, that sustains our physical being day by day? It is the imparted life, the *zoe*, breathed into our nostrils as in the case of the first man, to make and keep us alive.

How may we speak of what the *zoe* produces in our daily experience by stimulating us to act and think and feel? We may call it life in the sense of what experience produces, or we may call it by that wonderful word *psuche*, by which we love and hate and belief and hope and aspire and achieve in our natural lives. In other words, it is the soul of living, which ceases to exist when our *zoe* that produces it is withdrawn, just as naturally and logically as heat stops when the gas that produces it is turned off.

What shall we say of the life that departs at death? It is nothing less and nothing more than the spirit, the *pneuma*, that, as the medium of life, is breathed into the body at birth and breathed out again at death. In fact, the Greek way of saying that Jesus gave up the life He had lived for us in the flesh, is "he breathed out," phrased in King James as "gave up the ghost." That is what every man does at death merely breathes out again what was breathed into him at birth. There is absolutely no possibility here of conceiving that an immortal soul leaves the body at death, carrying with it a personality that goes right on thinking and feeling and never dying. The only thing that never dies is the life, the *zoe* of God, which He lends to us at birth and withdraws to Himself again at death. In other words, "the spirit shall return to God who gave it," and that is the end of life for us till God sees fit to breathe it in again, which He will do in the glorious resurrection morning for all those who are sleeping in Jesus.