

This manuscript was generated from the livestream transcript. It may contain transcription errors.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to go to a lecture that a friend of mine was giving at a medical college. He was speaking on the idea of a soul weighing twenty-one grams. Anybody ever hear this before?

It comes from a study from the early 1900s. What they did was they weighed a person, the person died, and they weighed them again, and they found out that the person weighed twenty-one grams less after they died. So they came up with a theory that the soul weighed twenty-one grams.

I hate to say it, but the study was pretty flawed. It was not repeatable. But it did kind of stick in the conscience of some people that the soul had physical weight. It also lent itself to a pretty good Sean Penn movie about twenty years ago.

But as my friend was giving this lecture, his point was to encourage med students to think about the spiritual implications of their profession—that they were going into a profession that was very focused on the physical body. But we human beings are concerned also with something that we call the soul. Though I admit it's hard to explain exactly what the soul is.

So, we human bodies have something like 206 bones. We have 640 muscles. We have somewhere between 28 and 36 trillion cells. If you took all of our DNA and unraveled it, it would stretch somewhere around the length of 22 billion miles. Although, if you do that, you will probably die.

So where in all of that—where in the bones and the muscles and the cells and the DNA—is there somewhere we can point and say, "That right there, that's the soul"?

Just an aside: Descartes thought that the soul was in the brain, particularly the pineal gland, which sat between the two hemispheres of the brain. He thought the pineal gland was the unifying part of the brain, and that must mean it is the seat of the soul.

But what is the soul? Is it something that takes up physical space? Does it have weight to it? Is there a point in our lives where the soul enters our bodies? Is there a point in our death where the soul leaves? What is the soul?

These are questions that we're probably not going to be able to answer in the next twenty minutes or so, because these are questions that human beings have been sitting with probably since the dawn of consciousness. Maybe Aristotle sums it up best when he says

that the whole is something more than the parts. Maybe the soul is the "more" than the parts of our body.

So let me tell you what scripture says about the soul. But before I do that, let me acknowledge that probably our common understanding of the soul comes a lot more from Greek philosophy than it does from the scriptures.

Starting somewhere around the fifth century B.C.E., Greek philosophers like Plato began to talk about the soul as being something separate from the body. Before that, they would talk about the human body having multiple souls within it—multiple souls making up one body. But starting around the fifth century B.C.E., Greek philosophers begin talking about the body being one thing and the soul being something different—specifically, the soul being something that is confined by the body in life, and then upon death, the soul is something that can live on after the body has died.

The Greeks introduced this idea of a dualistic nature of human life: that there is the physical and the soul. The physical can decay; the soul can be eternal. The physical can be damaged; the soul cannot be. There's a reason Nietzsche says that Christianity is "Plato for the people," because we have so often taken those ideas of Greek philosophy and just attached them to Christianity.

But if we actually go into what our scriptures say about the soul, I think we're going to find something very different from that common understanding. The Hebrew people have a different view of what the soul is—different from the Greeks and different from the other cultures that surrounded them. And I think the Hebrew understanding of the soul is going to help us understand what a soul really is.

The Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. Right there—*nephesh*. You can say it with me: *nephesh*.

Nephesh is one of those great Hebrew words. I love this word because *nephesh* can mean hundreds of different things depending on how you use it. Let me give you some of the most common definitions of *nephesh*.

It can mean *soul*. Throughout the scriptures, we have *nephesh* being referred to as soul. But the literal definition of *nephesh* is *throat*. This thing right here.

If you know the psalm, "As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs for God"—you know what that literally says? "As the deer pants for water, so my throat longs for God." That's a beautiful image, right? The deer is quenching its thirst with water; we are quenching our thirst with God. I love that image. But you can imagine why the Hebrew people associated the throat with soul, because think about all the things that keep us

alive: the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, the water that we drink—all of it passes through the throat.

Nephesh can also be used to refer to a whole body. That would be really confusing—I would think when you're talking about somebody's throat, every time you're talking about somebody's whole body. But again, this goes back to the idea that it is the throat that sustains everything. So nephesh can be used to refer to a whole human body—and not just a human body. Nephesh can be used to refer to most animal bodies as well, except for bugs and plants. Those don't have nepheshes, apparently. But every other body has a nephesh.

It can also be used to refer to a whole group of people—a family might be referred to as a nephesh. Nephesh can be a pronoun—if I'm talking about myself, I might refer to myself as nephesh. Nephesh can be used to talk about life itself—not just the physical form of a body, but the life that that body has—that can be nephesh.

All of this is to say that nephesh might be translated as "soul," but if we were to try to find a unity to all of these uses of the word, we might say that nephesh is *the whole of your being*. While Greek philosophy was leaning into dualism—that your body and your soul were two separate things—the Hebrew understanding of nephesh, of soul, is that they are unified, that your body and your soul are simply part of the whole of who you are.

We skip ahead to the New Testament, and by the time of the New Testament, you have that Hebrew belief in nephesh competing with the Greek philosophical ideas, and it becomes really hard to pin down a New Testament theology of the soul. Jesus almost always talks about soul as nephesh, but the Gospels are written in Greek, so the word there becomes *psyche*.

The passage we heard earlier from Matthew: "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." That word "life" there is, in Greek, *psyche*—soul. Jesus is talking about a soul there. But I think he's using it in the traditional Hebrew understanding, where he's talking about the soul not as something separate, but as a unified whole of somebody's being. Jesus talks about a soul being able to be destroyed—that it is not some immortal thing like the Greek philosophers would think, but it is the living, breathing wholeness of you.

Paul makes things complicated. Paul's good at that. Paul has a number of different ideas that come into play when he understands what a soul is, and there are three words that you have to understand in the Greek language that Paul plays with. He talks about *sarx*, which is this fleshy stuff that our bodies are made of. He talks about *soma*, which is an idealized human being. And he talks about *psyche*, that word the Greeks used for soul.

Paul doesn't talk about a soul being saved or going to heaven. He talks about a resurrection of the soma, the perfect human body. We might see this as Paul moderating the ancient Hebrew idea of nephesh with a Greek understanding of the soul, the psyche. But Paul clearly understands that the soul is not some trapped spiritual entity in our lives. He understands that the soul is some part of the whole—the wholeness of you.

So what might we be able to say about the soul, then? I think we can say that from the scriptures it's pretty clear that the soul is not something that resides within us, something that goes up to heaven when we die. I think both the Hebrew understanding and the teachings of Jesus point us toward the soul being something deeper than that. The soul is who we are. It is the flesh and blood. It is the spiritual and the sacred. And you can't find a dividing line between the two.

I think it's also clear that God is concerned not with the salvation of some spiritual being, but with the salvation of the whole self. That is why I think we are called to care for one another. We're not just called to preach at one another and to pray for one another. We're called to actually go into the world to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ—to make lives better by healing bodies, by feeding the hungry, by clothing the naked, by sheltering the unhoused. We are called to take care of the whole human being rather than some separated-out part that we call the soul.

And I think that is because our understanding of the soul that we get from the scriptures is that the soul is not some separate being. It is the wholeness of who we are.

I like Richard Rohr's understanding of the soul. He says that the soul is "God's I Am continued in me." The soul is God's I Am continued in me—that when we strip away all the pretenses, all the illusions we have in life, all the other stuff in our lives, when we strip it all away, when we are left with our true selves, that is something we might say is the soul, the nephesh.

And maybe we can't locate it. Maybe in the 206 bones, the 640 muscles, the trillions of cells, in the billions of miles of DNA that make us up—maybe we can't locate it. Maybe we can't weigh it. But perhaps when we are thinking about the soul, we do think about all those parts that make us up and realize that there is a sacredness in those—that our bodies are breathed into by God. We think of the sacredness of a God who created us out of an act of love and created us in turn to continue that love into the world.

So, taking Richard Rohr's understanding that the soul is God's I Am continued in me, maybe we take that another step and say that the soul is *God's love continued in me*. God's love that was breathed into us—the *ruach* breathed into us by God—and continued within us,

not just to reside in us, but to be lived by us. That the soul is God's love living through us, as the world is touched by the love of God, by the soul that we bring into the world.

Friends, let us be in an attitude of prayer.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, we are complicated beings. We are made up of many parts—some of them thriving, some of them wounded, some of them crying out, some of them rejoicing. We are a people of racing thoughts, aching bones, groaning souls. Help us to reclaim that idea, that ancient story, that the soul is not something that we have, it is something that we are—that the wholeness of who we are, the *nephesh*, may be a reflection of the love that you breathed into us. Lord, I pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.