

“Soul” And “Spirit” In Scripture

Christians sometimes wonder about the difference between the “*soul*” and the “*spirit*.”

When discussing the “*soul*” they wonder if it is immortal, or what happens to the “*soul*” when a person dies.

In order to answer these questions we must have some basis or frame of reference for our discussion.

As with all the articles on this website, we use the inspired Word of God, the Christian Bible, as the basis and frame of reference.

The “*soul*” in the Old Testament –

The usual word in Hebrew translated “*soul*” is “*nephesh*” meaning a breathing creature, or living creature.

Genesis 2:7 [New King James] *“And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”*

We see that the “*soul*” is the end product of the combination of a physical body, made out of the elements we find in the rest of the physical creation, plus the introduction of a spiritual element, the breath of the Creator God.

Genesis 1:20-24 [New King James] *“Then God said, ‘Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.’ So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’ So the evening and the morning were the fifth day. Then God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind’; and it was so.”*

The creation of the animals lacked this spiritual element, they were created out of the sea and soil, but **no** mention of the spiritual element, the breath of the Creator God.

All animals have life within them as they are created by the Creator God, the source of all life, [**John 1:3-4**].

Genesis 9:4-6 [New King James] *“But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.’”*

The life, Hebrew “*nephesh*” is within the blood of animals and humans.

Leviticus 17:11 [New King James] *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”*

Physical life force and blood are linked, in both animals and humans.

The experience of Adam in his creation, **this unique personal input of life breath from the Creator, sets humans apart for all breathing animals whose life is in the blood.**

Job 32:8 [New King James] *“But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding.”*

This special spirit element given **only** to human beings was an eternal purpose.

The Hebrew word translated “*understanding*” is “*biyn*” meaning to separate mentally, to consider, to perceive, to think.

This is an essential ability for a human being to develop character which is the original and overall purpose of human life.

Genesis 1:26-27 [New King James] *“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”*

The Hebrew word translated “*image*” is “*tselem*” meaning resemblance, shadow, outward form.

“*Likeness*” is Hebrew word “*demûwth*” meaning manner, model, attributes, character.

In this original creation only “*image*” was created because character requires time spent in the presence of the person whose character we wish to reflect.

The Hebrew word translated “*spirit*” is “*rûwach*” meaning breath, in this case the breath of the Creator God.

Job 27:3-4 [New King James] *“As long as my breath is in me, and the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit.”*

Life and this spirit in humans are linked to the character that Job claims.

Job 32:18 [New King James] *“For I am full of words; the spirit within me compels me.”*

This spirit within Job compels Job to answer the comments of his friends.

Job 33:4 [New King James] *“The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”*

The Spirit mentioned is the Holy Spirit who was involved in the original creation, [**Genesis 1:2**] along with God the Father, and Jesus Christ, [**John 1:1-3**].

Job 34:12-15 [NIV] *“It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice. Who appointed him over the earth? Who put him in charge of the whole world? If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust.”*

All human life is dependent on this human spirit, to remain human and not become just animals.

Daniel 4:33-34 [New King James] *“That very hour the word was fulfilled concerning Nebuchadnezzar; he was driven from men and ate grass like oxen; his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair had grown like eagles’ feathers and his nails like birds’ claws. And at the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honoured Him who lives forever:”*

The Hebrew translated “*understanding*” is “*manda*” meaning intelligence, knowledge, reason, that are abilities that the human spirit gives us.

In Old Testament Hebrew thought there is an overlapping of two words used to describe the life force in human beings, “*nephesh*” and “*lêb*” meaning heart that is the centre of life, as the heart is central to human physical life.

Proverbs 16:23 [New King James] *“The heart of the wise teaches his mouth, and adds learning to his lips.”*

It is our heart that drives our words and actions.

Proverbs 23:6-7 [New King James] *“Do not eat the bread of a miser, nor desire his delicacies; for as he thinks in his heart, so is he. ‘Eat and drink!’ he says to you, but his heart is not with you.”*

The very character of a person is formed and governed by the heart, that is personality, will and mind.

These are modern terms which all reflect something of the meaning of the heart and spirit in Biblical usage.

Psalms 139:14 [New King James] *“You covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvellous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.”*

The Hebrew word translated “*soul*” is “*nephesh*.”

Zechariah 12:1 [New King James] *“The burden of the word of the LORD against Israel. Thus says the LORD, who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him:”*

The Hebrew word translated “*forms*” is “*yâtsar*” meaning to mould to a determined shape, [**Isaiah 64:8**]. It is our human spirit which God as the Master Potter is shaping.

1 Corinthians 15:49 [New King James] *“And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.”*

The Greek word translated “*image*” is the word “*ëikôn*” meaning representation or resemblance, the same as the Hebrew word “*tselem*” translated “*image*” in **Genesis 1:26-27**, the starting point of every human being, moving towards our being in the “*likeness*,” character of Jesus Christ referred to in this scripture as “*heavenly Man*.”

Ecclesiastes 3:19-21 [New King James] *“For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?”*

The Hebrew word translated “*spirit*” is “*rûwach*” meaning life breath or life force, given by the Creator God to make us human.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 [New King James] *“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”*

This answers the question of **Ecclesiastes 3:21**.

The Hebrew word is “*rûwach*,” the breath of God, the breath of life.

Psalms 31:5 [New King James] *“Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.”*

David offered his life force “*rûwach*,” back to God for Him to use.

Proverbs 20:27 [New King James] *“The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the inner depths of his heart.”*

Hebrew word “*neshâmâh*” referring to divine breath or intellect.

It is through this human spirit that God can clearly see who and what we are, [Psalms 139:1-17].

Isaiah 26:9 [New King James] *“With my soul I have desired You in the night, yes, by **my spirit** within me I will seek You early; for when Your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”*

Seeking our Creator God involves both our physical body “*nephesh*” and the human spirit within us.

Romans 12:1-2 [NIV] *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

The Greek word translated “*bodies*” is “*soma*” referring to the whole life force, body, mind and human spirit.

Matthew 26:41 [New King James] *“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”*

The Greek word translated “*spirit*” is “*pněuma*” referring to the human spirit, the breath of God, our minds.

The Greek word translated “*flesh*” is “*sarx*” referring to human nature and passions.

Luke 23:46 [New King James] *“And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, ‘Father, “into Your hands I commit My spirit.”’ Having said this, He breathed His last.”*

Spirit is Greek word “*pněuma*” the divine breath that made Jesus Christ human, **not** the Holy Spirit.

Luke 24:39-43 [New King James] *“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled, He said to them, ‘Have you any food here?’ So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence.”*

The resurrected Jesus Christ had the ability to appear as a human being with flesh and bone, note no blood for His resurrected life had no need of blood to exist, and He had on the cross shed all of His life-giving blood for us.

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 [New King James] *“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”*

Every true Christian looks forward to this experience at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

John 4:24 [New King James] *“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

As we have seen in **Romans 12:1-2**, **worship of God is a total surrender of our body, mind and human spirit to Him.** The Greek word translated “spirit” is “*pnēuma*” what is within us as a result of divine breath, and “truth” is referring to the inspired words of God as recorded in the Christian Bible, [**John 17:17**].

Acts 7:59 [New King James] *“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”*

The “spirit” that Stephen wanted his Lord Jesus Christ to receive back was “pnēuma,” the divine breath that he had received from God, **his human spirit.**

Romans 1:9 [New King James] *“For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers,”*

Paul’s witness was the result of God using his human spirit, [“*pnēuma*,”].

How does this happen?

John 7:37-39 [New King James] *“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”*

It is the Holy Spirit working through the heart [Greek “*kōllōs*”] which we have seen is linked to the human spirit, that enables the Holy Spirit [God] to bring about the conversion of human beings.

John 16:5-11 [New King James] *“But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”*

This is how the Holy Spirit works and He does this through true believers as they live as “*salt and light*” [**Matthew 5:13-16**]. This is the “*living waters*” referred to in **John 7:38**.

Romans 2:29 [Amplified Bible] *“But he is a Jew [God’s people] who is one inwardly and true circumcision [an outward sign that a man was a Jew] is of the heart [“*kardia*” meaning the thoughts and feelings expressed in the mind and human spirit] a spiritual and not a literal matter. His praise is not from men but from God.”*

Conversion from a godless human being to a Christian takes place within the heart and human spirit as the Holy Spirit actively within us re-educates us.

Romans 7:14 [New King James] *“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.”*

The Greek word used for “spiritual” is “*pneumatikōs*” which comes from the root word “*pnēuma*” meaning the “*breath of God*,” [**2 Peter 1:20-21**].

This is a prelude to Paul describing the spiritual battle that is being fought within our heart and human spirit, [Romans 7:17-25] against our natural human nature, that is influenced by Satan the god of this world, [2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19].

Without the Holy Spirit within us, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we have **no** hope of victory, [Ephesians 6:10-18].

Romans 7:7 [New King James] *“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet.’”*

The law shows us clearly what is sin, [Romans 3:20].

1 Corinthians 2:11 [New King James] *“For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”*

Our ability as human beings to think, plan and make decisions is centred on our human spirit [“*pněuma*”] but only with the addition of the Holy Spirit can we know God and spiritual matters.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 [New King James] *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*

Both our physical bodies and the human spirit [“*pněuma*”] belong to the Creator God. This must always be foremost in our mind, thoughts and actions as a true Christian, [Acts 20:28].

2 Corinthians 4:16 [New King James] *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”*

How does this renewing take place in our “*inward man*”?

Ephesians 3:14-19 [New King James] *“For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, **to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man**, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height, to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

It is the active presence of the Holy Spirit within us that gives us this strength to face whatever trials that human life will bring.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 [New King James] *“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

“*Spirit*” is Greek word “*pněuma*” meaning divine breath, the human spirit in humans [Job 32:8]. “*Soul*” Greek word “*psuchē*” meaning a breathing physical being; “*body*” is Greek word “*sōma*,” the whole instrument of physical life.

[Please download and study the article ‘Do We Have A Triune Nature?’ listed under sub-heading ‘Human Nature’.]

Hebrews 4:12-13 [New King James] *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”*

The Word of God, the Christian Bible, can penetrate every part of our life and will reveal where we need to be re-educated by the Holy Spirit.

James 2:26 [New King James] *“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”*

The “*body*” – Greek word “*soma*” meaning whole life experience – is dead without the “*spirit*” – Greek word “*pn̄uma*” the divine breath that makes us human, which returns to God who gave it, [Ecclesiastes 12:7].

As we have seen, the “*soul*” in scripture is really referring to the life of a person as a human being who has been created by God without any eternal pre-existence.

To say that a person has an immortal soul is a contradiction of terms.

The Christian Bible sees a human being as mortal, subject to death, [Matthew 10:20].

God has placed a spiritual element in every human being, [Job 32:8] that gives them the ability to think, plan and make decisions.

This “*human spirit*” can act only through the human mind and body, that returns to the dust at death, while the “*human spirit*” retained by God will be given a spirit body, in which to live, at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:50-54 [New King James] *“Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’”*

This transformation will happen to all true Christians, “*the trumpet will sound*” refers to the trumpets announcing Jesus Christ’s return to earth, [Revelation chapters 8-10].

1 John 3:1-3 [New King James] *“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”*

The full details of this “*putting on*” of eternal life is not yet known by human beings, but belief in this should motivate us all to a life that is pure and free from sin.

Romans 12:1-2 [NIV] *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

A life surrendered completely to our Creator God and a life that is being re-educated by the Holy Spirit who is God and developing the “*fruits*” of the Holy Spirit, [Galatians 5:22-25] and following the lead of the Holy Spirit.