

# “Solidify Your Souls”

Matthew 25:31–46; Mark 10:42–45;  
James 2:14–17

## How is it with your soul? Solid? Or a bit crumbly?

What are we really? Of what are we made? Are we souls trapped in bodies waiting to be freed so our souls can return to heaven? Or are we whole creatures, made in the image of God, with every bit of us made good and destined for eternity?



Many of us grew up in the church being taught that our true selves are called “souls” and that when we die, we are set free from these fragile bodies so that we may enter heaven with God. But the truth is that this view is much more indebted to Plato than to the Bible. This mistake, that has a long history in the Church, causes us to overlook the truth that just as Jesus was resurrected, so shall we be resurrected -- bodily.

So we come to this series preparing to be surprised as we seek to grasp that we called to solidify our souls, as it were, to know and to live as the solid souls God created. To help us get off on the right foot, here is the entry on “soul” from the Lexham Bible Dictionary. Notice that the Greek *psyche*, sometimes translated “soul,” is best understood as “life” or “self.”

**SOUL** (*nephesh*, *psychē*). Life or being, with an ultimate source in God.

### Old Testament Usage

The two terms used for “soul” in Scripture— *nephesh* and *psychē*—both show remarkable breadth in terms of contextual usage. One study of the Hebrew term, *nephesh*, yielded over 750 uses, which can be sorted into 10 categories. Major usages communicate:

- indicate meanings of desire (Pss 25:1; 42:2)
- personal or individual being (Gen 12:5; Lev 2:1)
- a conscious self (Lev 11:44–45)
- emotional state (Gen 26:35; Job 21:4; Eccl 7:9).

Even animals are at times qualified as possessing a *nephesh*, evident in their animate status (Gen 1:20–24).

The holistic anthropology of the Old Testament is evident early in Genesis, where *nephesh* refers to the finished created individual, embodied and breathing: “Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (*nephesh*)” (Gen 2:7 NIV). In later poetic Hebrew, the psalmist juxtaposes soul and body: “My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land” (Psa 63:1 NIV; compare Psa 84:2). The root of *nephesh*, according to E. Jacob, means “to breathe” in a physical sense—a decisive mark of the living creature (Jacob, “Psyche,” 1343). This indicates the closeness of *nephesh* to the literal word for breath or spirit in the Hebrew *ruach*.

In the New Testament, the term *psychē* is often translated as “life” (Mark 10:45; Acts 20:24; Rev 12:11). Like the Hebrew term *nephesh*, the Greek term *psychē* has a wide semantic domain. In New Testament passages where it appears, Hellenistic philosophical influence is sometimes visible—particularly in passages communicating a distinction between body and soul and the possibility of severing the two (Matt 10:28; Acts 2:27; Rev 6:9; compare Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 5:8; 12:3).

Christian theology denies the dualism of Platonism and other forms of Greek philosophy that taught the body was a prison from which to escape. While it warns of the desires of the body becoming

problematic or distorted, Christian writings do not teach that the body in itself is evil. New Testament passages Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12 employ the body as a metaphor for the ideal of harmonious unity in the church.<sup>1</sup>

So, when we speak of ourselves as souls, we are speaking of our whole being, our entire self. And the question before us is this: Just how solid is our soul?

Souls made in the image of God

In the very first chapter of Genesis, the Bible seeks to shape our understanding of God and of ourselves. We are told that there is a God who created everything and pronounced it good. We are told that God created humans in his own image, setting them apart from the rest of God's creation. Indeed, one of the most remarkable claims that Christians make is that we and all humans are made in the image or likeness of God. To use the old Latin phrase, we are the *imago dei*—the image of God.

But what does this really mean? Certainly, it doesn't mean that we look like God, for God has no physical body. Rather, there are a couple of truths that are proclaimed here.

First, God is sovereign over God's creation and as the sovereign, God has appointed humanity to exercise wise and caring dominion over what God has created. It is a bit like seeing each of us an outpost for God, charged with responsibilities over all that God has entrusted to us. Ancient kings would erect statues of themselves in the farflung reaches of their empires connoting the extent of their rule. So, we are images of God reflecting that God rules and that we have been given authority and responsibility to rule on God's behalf -- wisely and as good stewards of what has been entrusted to us.

Second, to proclaim that humans are the *imago dei* is to proclaim that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. God is unity in three persons; we are created in the plural, male and female (v. 27). Humans are marked out from the rest of creation. Every single human life is to be cherished and protected, accorded dignity and respect. Every person on the planet is made in God's image -- the people we love and the people we hate, those we admire and those we despise. We should never be surprised that the two greatest teachings of God are that we must love God and love others -- all others.

Further, from the creation account in Genesis 2, we learn that we were made from the dust of the earth, from flesh and bone, all of which speaks to the goodness of God's material world. We were made from the stuff of this world and are part of it, not merely spiritual beings trapped in the wrong place. And more remarkable yet, God made us only a little less than divine (Psalm 8:4). So we cannot be surprised by scenes such as Revelation 20 above, where we souls reign with Christ in God's kingdom. This is a theme that carries through the Bible from beginning to end. The question always is what such a kingdom looks like and how we are to rule. So let's turn to the Sermon on the Mount.

### ***The Beatitudes***

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not a new and more stringent system of rules nor is it an impossible ideal. Rather, when Jesus sits down to teach his followers, he is training them in the Kingdom of God. These nine beatitudes, with which Jesus begins his teaching, are not simply an introduction to what follows – they are its very foundation. These are not “entrance requirements” to God's Kingdom. They are not conditional – none of them say “if you will x, then y.” These are straightforward declarative statements of what is. Indeed, Eugene Boring goes further.<sup>2</sup> He notes that the Beatitudes do not merely declare what the Kingdom is; they bring it into being – much like an umpire crying out “strike” or a minister pronouncing a couple husband and wife. The Beatitudes are Gospel – they proclaim to the world the Good News. Because these are prophetic pronouncements, they point us toward the teacher. They are not self-evident. It is Jesus' authority that makes the Beatitudes the foundation of the Sermon.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Durst, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> from Eugene Boring's excellent commentary on Matthew's Gospel in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Another excellent and readable commentary is by Douglas Hare in the *Interpretation* series.

## ***The Kingdom of Heaven***

Each of the nine Beatitudes points us to God's Kingdom (the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They either mention the kingdom directly (the first and eighth Beatitude) or to some aspect of it. In the kingdom of God, God's people will be comforted and filled and shown mercy. They will inherit the earth. They will be rewarded in heaven. They will be called the children of God. They will see God!<sup>3</sup> All the rest of the Sermon on the Mount has to be read in this bright light.

### ***For whom is the Kingdom of Heaven?***

The kingdom of heaven is for the people of God. The people of God are those who place their faith in Jesus Christ, in God. Those who have faith in Jesus strive to be ever-truer disciples. Those who are disciples of Christ strive to be Christ-like, much as an apprentice strives to be like the master. In the Beatitudes, Jesus teaches about his followers about the characteristics of disciples. Again, this is about training for the kingdom. Here are some thoughts on each Beatitude.

- Those who are "poor in spirit" are those who know that they are dependent on God. As Boring puts it: "Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God."
- "Those who mourn" doesn't refer only to the death of loved ones, but also to our lament for the condition of God's creation and his people. In other words, those who strive for the kingdom of God realize how far short of God's hope the present world falls.
- Like "poor in spirit," meekness (meaning gentleness and humility) flies in the face of conventional wisdom about what it takes to be "successful." Of course, Jesus also challenges us to reconsider what we mean by success. (see Psalm 37:9,11 also).
- "Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" are those who long for the coming of God's kingdom and the vindication of right. At the same time we need to understand that Jesus brings comfort to those who are quite literally poor, hungry, and thirsty.
- Matthew chooses a Greek word for "mercy" that is not merely about having compassion for others – the merciful are those who act on their compassion.
- In v. 8, purity of heart goes beyond the avoidance of impure thoughts to a singleminded devotion to God.
- Many of Jesus' followers expected him to call for the overthrow of the Roman oppressors, by force if necessary. But Jesus disappoints them. The people of the kingdom are people of peace. In God's kingdom, swords are broken into plowshares.

Jesus knows that to the extent that his training of his disciples moves them toward "Christ-likeness," they will be increasingly out of step with the world around them. They will be reviled and persecuted as they shape their lives around the values of the kingdom. Jesus pronounces blessing on them and on their prophetic mission . . . our mission . . . to be the light to the world . . . to be Solid Souls.

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<sup>3</sup> In Revelation 22:4, God's people see his face. Compare this with Exodus 33:20 where God warns Moses that he cannot see God's face and live. Don't get too literal here. We don't know if God has a face like you or I do. But just reflect for a while on this imagery and the promise that we will see God as Adam once did, when, in the evenings, God would come and walk in the garden with his children. The significance and comfort of what the biblical writers are trying to tell us ought to take our breath away!