

## The often misunderstood and still mysterious soul

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One of the people who trialled these studies worked hard to define spirituality for herself. In the end, she concluded that broadly speaking spirituality was

- 1) A personal experience of one's ultimate beliefs;
- 2) That which gives inspiration to one's life;
- 3) A belief in a power greater than ourselves

What do you think about this description? Is there anything missing?

### What is the soul?

The above definition doesn't talk about that mysterious aspect of a person, which Christian spirituality calls the "soul." If you look up "soul" in a Bible dictionary, it will give a definition something like the following

*Soul: self; inner life; one's inmost being; (physical) life; that which has life; living creature; person; human being.*

It is very significant that the Greek idea of the "soul" as the intangible part that survives death is not included in the definition. The ancient Greeks thought of the world as made up of the material and the spiritual. The spirit (soul) was housed in the material, the body, and longed to be released. Death was the point of release of the spirit (soul). Ideally the way to live was to nurture the spirit, which was more valuable, as far as possible. The material, the body with its passions was devalued and sometimes despised.

So how does the NT use the word "soul"? This is difficult to establish, because almost every time the word is used modern translators of the Bible take a decision about how best to render the word. With the help of various translations, examine how the word for "soul" is used in the following verses:

- Matt 2:20
- Matt 6:25
- Matt 11:28, 29
- Matt 16:26
- Matt 22:37
- John 10:11, 15, 17, 24
- Acts 14:2
- 1 Cor 15:45
- Rev 12:11

It is just too easy to think of “soul” like the Greeks did. But in the OT, which is in the background in most of uses of the word in the verses above, “soul” is a description for the person viewed holistically. It is simply misleading to talk of the “soul” as that which survives death and is the opposite of the body. The soul is not a part of the person. It is a way of describing the person as living, capable of relating, communicating and enduring beyond death.

This conclusion is only strengthened when you consider the adjective “soulful / soulful” which is derived from the noun “soul.” It only occurs four times in the NT, which is a surprise if you think of spirituality narrowly. Each time it occurs, the translators of our Bibles struggle to find a suitable English word. Look up the following references and discuss what might be the implications for your understanding of the “soul.”

- 1 Cor 2:14
- 1 Cor 15:44, 46
- Jude 1:19
- James 3:15

In at least one place the “soulful” is the opposite of the “spiritual”!

So as we attempt to map real spirituality it is not strictly a matter of the soul

### What then is spirituality according to the Bible?

Who is a “spiritual” person? Can you make a general definition of *spirituality* taking account of the introduction to this study?

Now try and define spirituality from a distinctly Christian perspective. What do you feel compelled to say to distinguish it from popular ideas of spirituality? Is there any overlap between the definitions?

Can you think of words used to describe spirituality in the Bible eg., concerns of the “soul”, matters of the “spiritual.”? (Use a concordance in your Bible to track down some references.) What initial observations can you make about the Bible’s apparent lack of real interest in spirituality?

Can you think of some verses that describe longing for a “spiritual” experience eg., Matt 5:6, 11:29, 30? Why isn’t the Bible more set up to answer the fundamental questions of spirituality?