

## A Living Soul – Genesis 2:7

This first Sunday of the New Year we will embark on a journey to talk about and practice something that is essential in our walk with the Lord: soul care.

Our study will take us from Genesis to Revelation, from Creation to the consummation of history when Christ returns. Every book in the Bible addresses the need for soul care and throughout scripture we are told how this is to be done. The term “soul care” is not found in the Bible, but the care of your souls is everywhere. So today, we start a month long journey to address the need of soul care.

Let me start by asking you two questions. First, do you understand what I mean by soul?

This Christmas I received a beautiful Christmas letter that contained a summary of the past year, with all its challenges and demands. This person told what it was like for a teacher scrambling to learn a new way of engaging the students in their class work without personal interaction. It was exhausting work (I can appreciate that) and almost wore this poor teacher out completely. Then hear what this person wrote:

*...One morning after my “Quiet Time,” before opening my virtual classroom, I looked outside and was stunned and amazed by the beauty of cherry flowers in bloom out in the backyard! ‘Twas a sight to behold—giving joy to the soul! Most of all, it reminded me of God’s unfailing love!*

I am sure you understand the phrase, “giving joy to the soul.” You can almost feel it as much as understand it.

So my second question is this: how would you describe the soul? That seems to be a much more difficult task. That will be our one assignment for today, to define or understand better what the soul is, and then ask, so why should we care about the soul?

We start our journey today at the beginning... a good place to be at the start of a new year. We turn to Genesis 1:1 and read again those words that tell us why we are here and why everything else we see and experience is here: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

Our universe did not suddenly appear by chance, and life did not evolve over eons of years. What you see and experience all around you is the work of the great Creator God who one day came to earth as a man so that he could also be our Saviour. Of course that is the story of Christmas we just celebrated: “In the beginning was the Word... all things were created through him... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And when God came to save us he came as Jesus...

But I rush ahead too far. Turn with me to Genesis chapter 2.

In Genesis chapter one we read about the creation of the world and all that is in it. Chapter two takes us back again to day six to recount the creation of people, which was meant to be God's greatest creation. Everything else comes into existence as God spoke the word, but with man things were different.

Read with me Genesis 2:7.

The first thing we note is that God used something else to make mankind. He took the dust of the earth. As Bible Scholar Matthew Henry says,

“He was made of the dust, the small dust, such as is upon the surface of the earth... He was not made of gold-dust, powder of pearl, or diamond dust, but common dust, dust of the ground. Hence he is said to be of the earth, *choikos—dusty*, 1 Co. 15:47”<sup>1</sup>

And so God takes some ordinary dust of the ground, and it says “he formed the man.”

The word **formed** (from *yāšar*, 2:7) describes the work of an artist. Like a potter shaping an earthen vessel from clay, so **God** formed man from clay. Man was made by divine plan; also he was made from the earth. He is “earthy” in spite of subsequent dreams of being like God (3:5). The Hebrew for **man** (*'ādām*, whence “Adam,” 2:20) is related to the word for **ground** (*'āḏāmâh*; cf. 3:17).<sup>2</sup>

And so our first picture of man is a clay vessel laying on the ground. It was beautiful. It was perfect. But it was lifeless. And forever this body would be connected to the earth. We would learn to say at funeral services when the body once again looks like this lifeless shell, “From dust we came, to dust we will return.”

But God is not finished yet. We are told that God performs one more act in the creation of man. We are told that God breathes into the nostrils of that lifeless clay being the breath of life, and everything changes. That dust turns to flesh and blood and bone and man became a living soul. The root of the Hebrew word for soul, נְפֶשׁ (nephesh), according to E. Jacob, means “to breathe” in a physical sense—a decisive mark of the living creature (Jacob, “Psyche,” 1343)<sup>3</sup>. Man begins to breathe and as long as there was breath, there was life – there was a soul.

What was created out of the earth now is filled with Divine life. People are the only creatures in all God's great creation that are both of the earth and of heaven at the same time. In the first account of creation God says, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26) and here in the second account we are told how this

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<sup>1</sup> Henry, M. (1994). [\*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume\*](#) (p. 8). Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, A. P. (1985). [\*Genesis\*](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 30). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>3</sup> Durst, D. (2016). [\*Soul\*](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

happens. God breathes his life into man and that man now has the capacity for love and compassion, relationships and knowledge, happiness and sorrow. Man was created to be like his Creator. The rest of the Bible shows us what God is like.

The next chapter in Genesis tells how man marred that beautiful image and likeness of God in his soul, and it would take an incredible rescue mission by the Creator to set things right again. That, or course, is the story of Jesus.

But man still had a soul, a life that relates to his Creator, a life that can be redeemed by that same Creator come as Saviour.

For our purposes today we are mindful of the fact that it was God who made us a living soul. Whatever a soul is, it is God given, and is intimately connected with God's purposes for our lives. Despite the arrival of sin into our world and the havoc it wrecked on mankind, the soul of man was not destroyed.

In the Old Testament the word "soul" (*nephesh*) is found 753 times, and is used to refer to the soul, life, persons, mind, heart, creatures, will, desire, appetite, man and more. In the New Testament the word bearing the meaning of "soul" is *ψυχή* (*psychē*), and it is often translated "life". Life and soul are intimately related.

In the New Testament we discover there is hope for our souls because of Jesus.

James 1:21 and 5:20 tells us that the Word of God can save and recover our souls.

Hebrews 10:39 tells us the outcome of our faith is the salvation of our souls.

1 Peter 2:11 warns us that fleshly desires are harmful to our souls.

Hebrews 6:19 reminds us that hope anchors our souls.

What I am hoping you see is that the scriptures have many references to the soul, to that life God breathed into us that makes us who we are. The soul is not something that exists outside the body, and neither can the body live without the soul. The hope of the Christian is a new resurrection body that will house our souls – our personhood – at the resurrection of the dead.

But until then we are a living soul, people with body and spirit and life.

Maybe John Ortberg's simple definition would be helpful. In his book, "Soul Keeping" Ortberg suggests that the soul is the inner life of a person.<sup>4</sup> It is made up of body, mind and will. Every thought, action, decision shapes our souls. We will get into that more in weeks to come.

For now, can you understand when I talk about our inner life? It is the you only God and you can see. But when that inner life is out of balance, the people around you will know because it will be seen in your outer life. When I am anxious, or upset, or impatient

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<sup>4</sup> John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2014), p. 34.

knows there is something wrong in my inner life. She also knows she cannot fix it. And though I am the only one who can address the needs of my inner life, I cannot do it alone. We are a living soul made by God, for God, and made to need God. When we try to be self sufficient our inner life will be out of balance and it will show in our outer life. People too often try to fix their outer lives thinking this will fix their inner lives, their souls. It does not work that way. Listen to Rev. John Ortberg's experience with this:

"We each have an outer life and inner one. My outer self is the public, visible me. My accomplishments, my work, and my reputation lie there. My outer world had changed a great deal ... I was working at a church that – in the little world of my profession – was large and visible. There were more people on staff at this church than there were attendees where I last worked. Suddenly people sought out my opinion more and assumed I was smarter than I was and invited me to speak at their events. My outer world was now larger and busier and more complex than it had ever been.

But my inner life had not grown at all. My inner life is where my secret thoughts and hopes and wishes live. Because my inner life is invisible, it is easy to neglect.<sup>5</sup>

Ortberg tells how Abraham Lincoln was a brilliant lawyer, but notoriously disorganized. Lincoln had a huge file folder labelled, "If you can't find it anywhere else, look here." Ortberg goes on to say, "Our inner life can soon look as jumbled and disorganized as Lincoln's file folder."

That is why we are taking this journey this month to focus on soul care. Matthew Henry said this about the soul:

It takes its lodging in a house of clay, and is the life and support of it. It is by it that man is a living soul, that is, a living man; for the soul is the man. The body would be a worthless, useless, loathsome carcass, if the soul did not animate it. To God that gave us these souls we must shortly give an account of them, how we have employed them, used them, proportioned them, and disposed of them; and if then it be found that we have lost them, though it were to gain the world, we shall be undone for ever.<sup>6</sup>

Let me close with a story. It was first recorded as told by Dr. Peter Marshall, former Chaplain of the United States Senate, and quoted by John Ortberg in his book, "Soul Keeping". It is about the "Keeper of the Stream."

This story is about an old man who lived in an Alpine forest high above a small Austrian village. This man had been hired by the town council to clear away the rubbish from the pools of water up in the mountains that fed the stream that flowed through their town. With faithful regularity, the keeper of the stream moved along the hill slopes and ravines removing leaves,

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<sup>5</sup> Ortberg, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Henry, M. (1994). [\*Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume\*](#) (p. 8). Peabody: Hendrickson.

branches and accumulated silt that could contaminate the fresh flow of water. Truly, because the town possessed such a beautiful clear stream, it became a popular attraction for tourists from all over the world.

Years passed and one evening the town council met for its annual meeting. As the council members looked over the budget, one council member began to question the salary being paid to this obscure keeper of the stream. He questioned why they kept the old man year after year. Because of this council member's persistence and a general mood for austerity, the council members voted to cut the old man's services from the budget and tell him he was no longer needed.

Now for several weeks nothing happened, and the members of the town council congratulated themselves on their savings for taxpayers. But by early fall the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, impeding the flow of water. Rollicking rapids with sprays of white-water became stagnant pools. One afternoon someone noticed a slightly yellowish tint in the town water. Within a few weeks, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was detected. Tourists to the little town soon left and many of the residents became sick. The town council was forced to call a special meeting. Realizing their error, they quickly amended the budget and rehired the keeper of the stream. Within a few weeks the stream cleared and the little town returned to normal.<sup>7</sup>

John Ortberg concludes by saying, "The stream is your soul. And you are the keeper."<sup>8</sup>

God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul. We too are living souls, people with a soul, an inner life that must be cultivated and cared for with God's help. It is easy to fill our lives with the pursuit of so many things, but may we always take care for our souls first.

As Jesus said, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Matthew 16:26)

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<sup>7</sup> <https://rghenson21.blogspot.com/> Tuesday, May 28, 2013 – accessed January 2, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ortberg, 14.