

What does the biblical term “soul” mean?

1. What does the biblical term “soul” mean? Do animals have a “soul”? If the “soul” of man can sin, does this mean that an animal can sin? How is man different from animals? Study Genesis 1:20-21; 9:4-5; 35:18; 37:21; Mark 8:35-37; Genesis 2:7.

The Bible has two meanings for the biblical term “soul”.

1. In one sense, “soul” refers to the essence that makes an animal or human being alive or living.

The subtle nuances of the Hebrew term for “soul” “nephesh” can be often lost in the translation to English. For example, “nephesh,” seen in Genesis 1:20-21; 9:4-5, is understood as that which makes an animal alive such as blood.

Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living (nephesh) creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.” God created the great sea monsters and every living (nephesh) creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. (Gen 1:20-21)

“Only you shall not eat flesh with its life (nephesh), that is, its blood. Surely I will require your lifeblood (nephesh); from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man’s brother I will require the life (nephesh) of man.” (Gen 9:4-5)

The Hebrew term “nephesh” can be used in a similar sense with human beings (Gen 35:18; 37:21).

It came about as her soul (nephesh) was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. (Gen 35:18)

But when Reuben heard this and rescued him out of their hands and said, “Let us not take his life (nephesh).” (Gen 37:21)

In the New Testament, the Greek usage of the term “soul” (psychē) is used similarly in Mark 8:35-37.

For whoever wishes to save his life (psychē) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (psychē) for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain that whole world, and forfeit his soul (psychē)? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul (psychē)? (Mark 8:35-37)

2. In another sense, the term “soul” refers to the immaterial aspect or inner life of a person that represents the person’s personality, emotions, will and spirituality.

In contrast to His other animals which He created multitudes, God created a single human being with the distinction of having been given something more than a physical life; man became a living soul (Gen 2:7).

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (nephesh). (Gen 2:7)

The souls of human beings are distinctive from that of animals, because human beings have an immaterial element of their nature that relates to God (Gen 2:7; Ps 103:1; Luke 1:46).

The soul can have desires:

Food

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but now our appetite (nephesh) is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna. (Num 11:6)

Money

You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart (nephesh) on it; so that he will not cry against you to the Lord and it become sin in you. (Deut 24:15)

Cravings of the heart

For the wicked boasts of his heart's (nephesh) desire, and the greedy man curses and spurns the Lord. (Ps 10:3)

The soul can have emotions:

Bitterness

She, greatly distressed (nephesh), prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. (1 Sam 1:10)

Grieves

Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard? Was not my **soul** grieved for the needy? (Job 30:25)

Then He said to them, “My **soul** is deeply grieved, to the point of death;... (Matt 26:38)

Dismay / anguish

And my **soul** is greatly dismayed; But You, O Lord – how long? (Ps 6:3)

Love

Tell me, O you whom my **soul** loves,... (Song 1:7)

Glad / rejoicing

Make glad the **soul** of Your servant, for to You, O Lord, I lift up my **soul**. (Ps 86:4)

The soul can have intellect and knowledge:

For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your **soul** (Prov 2:10)

I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Your works, and my **soul** knows it very well. (Ps 139: 14)

The soul can be willful:

To imprison his princes at will (nephesh), that he might teach his elders wisdom. (Ps 105:22)

The soul can worship, praise, and pray to God:

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But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my **soul** before the Lord. (1 Sam 1:15)

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the **soul**;... (Ps 19:7)

O God, you are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my **soul** thirsts for You,... (Ps 63:1)

Bless the Lord, O my **soul**, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. (Ps 103:1)

Return to you rest, O my **soul**, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have rescued my **soul** from death... (Ps 116:7-8)

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the **soul**; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both **soul** and body in hell. (Matt 10:28)

And Mary said: “My **soul** exalts the Lord,...” (Luke 1:46)

The soul can sin and be redeemed:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the **soul**. (1 Pet 2:11)

obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your **souls**. (1 Pet 1:9)

In Proverbs 2:10-11, the terms "soul", "heart" and "you" are used interchangeably, indicating that the term "soul" represents the totality of a person. The New Testament tells us clearly that death will separate the physical body from you (Matt 10:28). So while death separates you from your physical body, nothing separates you from your soul.

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