

Is man a two-part being or a three-part being?

One of the foundational teachings of Scripture concerning *man's inward being* is erroneously taught throughout Christendom today, causing mass confusion when it comes to "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:13). Man is a *triune* being; he is comprised of **three** parts: spirit, soul, and body. He is not simply a body with a soul, as many believe, nor only body and spirit. Let's look at how clearly Scripture makes this point.

Starting at the very beginning of Scripture, God says this just prior to the creation of man –

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion..."

Man is created after the image and likeness of God. He is *patterned after God*, and God speaks of Himself here in the *plural* form, "*Our image...Our likeness.*" The Hebrew word used here for God is 'Elohiym,' which literally means *two or more* gods. (It is no small matter that God chose to mention this about Himself in the direct context of man's creation.) The Scriptures clearly teach that there are not two or more *separate* Gods, but One God consisting of *three* separate parts; this is what we think of as the Trinity—

1 John 5:7

For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.

John 1:1-3, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 3 All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

1 Corinthians 8:6

...yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things...

John 10:30

(Jesus speaking) "I and the Father are one."

John 17:22 "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one..."

Matthew 28:19

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

John 4:24

God is Spirit...

And elsewhere we read a very clear, concise verse by Paul to the church at Thessalonica where he uses **three distinctly different words** when describing his desire to see each individual person be "completely sanctified" and "preserved blameless" at Jesus' return—

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit [Greek word 'pneuma'] and soul [Greek word 'psuche'] and body [Greek word 'soma'] be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Spirit, soul, and body. And another similar, specific distinction is mentioned in the Book of Hebrews—

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul ['psuche'] and spirit ['pneuma'], and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The word of God pierces and divides *soul* and *spirit* (two separate yet interconnected things), in the same manner as *joints* from *marrow* (two separate yet interconnected things). Soul and spirit both have to do with the inward man, the invisible parts of man, as this division by the word of God concerns the discerning of the *thoughts and intents of the heart*.

As we practice learning knowledge and gaining understanding "precept upon precept, here a little, there a little" (as described in Isaiah 28:9-10), let's see how Scripture presents the details of Jesus' death on the cross —

Luke 23:46

And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, 'into Your hands I commit My spirit ['pneuma']." Having said this, He breathed His last.

Acts 2:22-31

[Peter speaking] "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know- 23 Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; 24 whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

25 For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. 27 For You will not leave my soul ['psuche'] in Hades [many times translated erroneously as "hell"], nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. 28 You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.'

29 Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30 Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, 31 he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul ['psuche'] was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption."

Luke 23:52-53

This man went to Pilate and asked for the body ['soma'] of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and laid it in a tomb that was hewn out of the rock, where no one had ever lain before.

Jesus was not only *fully God* but He was also *fully man*. Luke records that Jesus commits His spirit into the hands of the Father just before He breathes His last breath. In the Book of Acts Peter speaks to the people of Israel concerning this man Jesus whom they crucified, and verse 22 shows us that Peter is clearly speaking about Jesus of Nazareth. In speaking of Jesus' death and resurrection, Peter uses David's own words from Psalm 16 (recorded nearly 1,000 years prior) in order to show the people that the patriarch David was *not talking about himself* but about the Christ when he wrote the psalm.¹ Peter was trying to convince the nation of Israel that their Messiah *did* come and the man Jesus was indeed the One they had been waiting for. Peter says that David *prophesied* that God's Holy One, the Christ – the Promised Descendant of David Who would sit on David's throne forever (the Son of David AND the Son of God, 2 Sam. 7:12-16)—**WOULD DIE, but He would not be held by death. His soul would not be left in Hades; His soul would GO to Hades, but not LEFT in Hades. The Christ, the Promised One, would be resurrected.**²

¹ The word 'Christ' is from a Greek word ('christos') meaning "anointed"; in Hebrew the word for "anointed" is 'mashiyach,' translated in English as "Messiah." Jesus being the Christ (the Messiah) simply means that He is The Anointed One that the nation of Israel was waiting for. Upon seeing the phrase "Jesus the Anointed One," we should be asking ourselves, "Anointed to do what?" And further Bible study would be needed.

² The Greek word 'Hades' – and its counterpart in the Hebrew 'Sheol' – are often translated into English as "hell." This is incredibly misleading and confusing. Hades and Sheol are used many ways, most often to denote "the grave," conveying the thought that the person who is mentioned as going there is *physically dead*, i.e. they no longer are alive in bodily form on the earth. These words have nothing to do with "forever and ever torment" for the "unsaved" (which is the popular, but erroneous, definition of "hell"). Hades and Sheol are always used in connection with one's "soul" going there upon death, as differentiated from one's "spirit." We will continue to expound on this distinction between soul and spirit as we move along in the study.

And lastly we see in Luke's account that Jesus's body was put into a tomb.

After Jesus' death, **but prior to His resurrection**, His *spirit* went to the Father, His *soul* went into Hades, and His *body* went into the tomb. That makes the man Jesus a *three-part being*, consisting of the same three parts mentioned by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

Now let's add more to the picture by briefly exploring the concepts of *life* and *death* (in the manner of "line upon line, here a little, there a little") as we refine our understanding of their definitions, specifically how Scripture presents it.

In a purely physical, secular sense, the words *life* and *death* are simple enough to understand: if one has *life*, he or she is breathing, their heart is pumping blood throughout their body, and their brain is active; if one does not have *life* then that person is *dead* – they are not breathing, the heart is not pumping blood through their body, and the brain is not active. Life in the secular sense simply means a person physically exists on this earth; *death* means they no longer do.

Most Christians/members of the church would agree with that explanation of life and death, yet they further believe that there is indeed some sort of life after death pertaining to the inner man (spirit/soul). Most of the church today can offer an explanation concerning this life after death, but often it comes across as a somewhat nebulous union between man and God in Heaven, a relationship that stretches throughout eternity.

The Scriptures present these antonymous words (life vs. death) in a much more complex way, yet in a very *clear* way. The world's simple view we just defined is indeed seen in God's Word (the impact on the physical body as we know it), but God moves beyond this simple view to express the terms life and death in a **spiritual and soulical** sense as well (that which impacts the *inward* parts of man). The intricacies of this concept can only be understood if you first understand the triune nature of man – spirit, soul, and body.

In Genesis 1:2–2:3 we read about God creating *life*; that is, He created living creatures. First He created the animals in the waters and the birds in the sky. He then created the animals on the earth. In the sixth day God created man (and woman, details given in Gen. 2:7-25) in order to rule over all the earth. He then pronounced all that He had made as being "very good" (Gen. 1:31). There is, however, a difference between the creation of the animals and the creation of man. First, the animals—

Genesis 1:20

Then God said, "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living [Hebrew word 'chay']

creatures [Hebrew word 'nephesh'], and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens."

Genesis 1:21

So God created great sea creatures, and every living ['chay'] thing ['nephesh'] 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.

Genesis 1:24

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living ['chay'] creature ['nephesh'] according to its kind: cattle and creeping things and beast of the earth, each according to their kind"; and it was so.

Genesis 1:30

Also, to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life ['chay' 'nephesh'], I have given every green herb for food"; and it was so.

And then man—

Genesis 2:7

Then the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath [Hebrew word 'nashamah'] of life ['chay']; and man became a living being ['chay' 'nephesh'].

The Hebrew word for "living" (adjective) and "life" (noun) is 'chay.' In the preceding passages from Genesis we see the word 'chay' used in conjunction with the word 'nephesh' in all accounts. When 'chay' and 'naphash'/'nephesh' are used together, they indicate a living, breathing, *physically alive* creature/being.

The animals/creatures are described as simply 'chay nephesh,' "living beings" when they are created. But with the creation of man, we see something additional. God breathes into man's nostrils the 'nashamah' of life, which means the "breath" of life (can also be translated as "spirit of life"). It is only after man receives this "breath/spirit of life" that he becomes a "living being."

Notably, the Hebrew word 'nephesh' is also the word translated as *soul* throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. This is similar in the case of the Greek word 'psuche'; it is translated as both "life" and "soul" interchangeably (Matt. 16:24-26 is one such example).

In the creation account of both man and the animals, *soul* is mentioned in connection with the life of the *physical being*, the physical body. There is a reason for this and further on in Scripture God tells us specifically the relationship between the soul and the body (called "flesh" in many cases) —

Leviticus 17:11a

11 For the life ['nephesh'] of the flesh is in the blood...

We can also translate this as—

“For the soul of the flesh is in the blood...”

The word “flesh” is used in a dual manner in Scripture. Many times, including in the preceding verse, the word “flesh” is referencing the physical, organic body which all animals and all men have when they are born into this world. Other times the word “flesh” is used to reference the *sin nature* of man, that which is associated with our first birth (the “old man” that still exists after we become initially “saved,” Rom. 6:6, Eph. 4:22, Col. 3:9). Context would dictate which is being referred to (though one can see how intricately connected they are: the earthly physical *flesh* is always going to have a *fleshly* sin nature connected to this world as long as the curse remains). This particular verse explains to us a most important concept concerning the relationship between the soul and the body – *the soul/life of the physical earthly body is found in the blood*. Since all physical bodies of flesh have blood running through them, all bodies of flesh have a soul and the soul is the “life,” or animating force, of the body. *Because of this relationship* the soul and the body are inextricably linked. (This is an important concept, so please make sure you grasp it.)

With the creation of man we saw that God *breathed* life into him. God gave him the “breath of life” which caused man to become a *living being*. The animals were also called *living* [creatures] yet they did not have the breath of God. Clearly, “the breath of life” which emanates from God Himself indicates something other than the animation of the organic body. The Scriptures plainly teach that when it comes to *mankind*, he/she must have the breath of God, *in addition to* the soul and the body, in order to be a “living being.”

This brings us back to the triune nature of man. The animals were created soul and body, but man was created soul and body *and* spirit/breath.³ Again we see that man is a three-part being – spirit, soul, and body.

So man was **alive**, all three parts, in the beginning when he was created. Man was a perfect creation without sin. An important question to ask at this point is, “Was man *immortal* when he was created?” Some think that the tree of *life* was present in the Garden for the purpose of imparting immortality (tree of “life” needed to sustain *physical life* of the body) to man, but can that be true? If the tree of life was in the Garden for that purpose, then we would need to presuppose that man, in his perfectly created state, was created with the capacity of physical, organic death. But that cannot be true, and the following passages will help explain why –

Genesis 2:15-17

Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you

³ The English words “breath” and “spirit” are interchangeable, translated from the same word, ‘nashamah’ (as well as ‘ruwach’) in Hebrew and ‘pneuma’ in Greek.

may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it **you shall surely die.**"

This is a clear command from the Lord about what Adam and the woman could and could not do. God gave an expressed consequence for disobedience—*death*. We later get commentary on this event and why the consequence was given –

Romans 6:23a

For the wages of sin is death...

Romans 5:12

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin...

God's command to Adam gave a clear recompense: if you sin (disobey), you will die. The converse would be true as well: *if you do not sin, you will not die*. So before Adam and the woman partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and thereby sinned, they *could not*, in their perfect state, *experience death, any type of death, either physically or spiritually or soulically*. They had not sinned; therefore, death had not entered the world.

But shortly after their creation, the man and the woman both disobeyed God, they *sinned* –

Genesis 3:6

So the woman saw that the tree [of the knowledge of good and evil] was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Because Adam and the woman disobeyed God, they died *the very day that they sinned* (Gen. 2:17). But they didn't physically keel over and stop breathing *that day*. So, then, *what is death*? And how did it affect Adam and the woman? Let's read further –

Genesis 3:7

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

Adam and the woman's bodies were still alive; they still possessed physical, natural life. Obviously death as a wage of sin does not mean *immediately ceasing to physically exist*. To find out what it does mean, let's keep reading –

Genesis 3:8-10

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Immediately after Adam and the woman partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, *on that very same day*, we see a separation between man and God. God called to Adam and said, “Where are you?” Obviously God is omniscient and knew where Adam and the woman were; the meaning and subtext here is that *God cannot see them*. And with man hiding himself from God for fear of being seen “naked,” we can understand this as simply a *picture* of separation between man and God. Death is the consequence of sin, and sin cannot be looked upon by God for He is holy; therefore, God separates the sinful man from Himself. This separation is what is meant by the word *death*.

This death sentence that was given to Adam and the woman had far reaching ramifications, for it was not only they who received the consequence –

Romans 5:12, 14

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...¹⁴ Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

Ephesians 2:1-2

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.

We can notice something very interesting when Adam’s son Seth is born –

Genesis 5:1-3

This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. 2 He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. 3 And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.

Seth is born in *Adam’s image and likeness*. Because of the initial transgression of the woman and Adam, death entered into the world and was passed on to everyone born of a man and a woman from then on (save One, Jesus, the One born to a *virgin*—the sin nature passes through *the man*). Therefore every person born to a man and a woman is born *dead*, separated from God. So how did death really affect man? Was it just their bodies, now destined to “return to the ground from which [they] came” (Gen. 3:19)? Was it their soul that died, since it is the life force of the body? Or was it their spirit, which connects man to God, setting him apart from the beasts of the field? The details of this verse we looked at earlier sheds more light on the subject –

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you [literally “make you holy”] completely; and may your whole [literally “entire”] spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Greek word for “completely” is ‘holoteles’ which comes from the words ‘holos’ and ‘telos.’ ‘Holos’ means “whole” or “all” and ‘telos’ means “end.” Additionally, the sentence structure of this verse is written in such a way in the Greek that the word “whole” should actually appear before each of man’s parts listed: spirit, soul, and body. Therefore this verse is more literally written as –

1 Thessalonians 5:23

Now may the God of peace Himself make your whole being holy at the end; and may your entire spirit, your entire soul, and your entire body be preserved complete and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is saying that everyone needs to be *wholly and entirely* sanctified – ALL THREE PARTS: spirit, soul and body. Man is currently *not holy, not sanctified* because all three parts of man were affected by death. So even though when we are born into this world we are alive *in the physical sense*, our spirit *and* soul *and* body are considered *dead, separated from God*. More accurately, the spirit is “dead,” the soul is “corrupted,” and not only does the body begin to decay, but it lacks a significant attribute necessary to be reunited with God, in His likeness and image—*glory*.

Simply put, “death” is separation from God; “life” (which is the opposite of “death”) is fellowship and togetherness with God. And since death affects all three parts of man, all three parts of man must be dealt with in respect to *life*. Which is just another way of saying all three parts of man must be saved from death.