

Nephesh P1

You are a soul

Podcast Date: November 13, 2017

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You are a soul

Jon: You've heard the phrase "guard your soul" or "God loves your soul" or "Jesus died to save your soul." We toss around this word soul a lot in religious circles. We have a body. We have a mind. We have emotions. But what is our soul?

Tim: People often assume the idea of eternal nonphysical existence that human's living on after death, apart from their bodies as disembodied souls forever and ever, that's a really important idea in the Bible, or a main teaching of the Bible. I certainly thought that till I actually started to read the Bible.

Jon: I'm Jon Collins, and this is The Bible Project podcast. Today we're going to talk about how you don't have a soul, but you are a soul. Tim and myself and the rest of the Bible project crew have been making a series of videos on biblical words. The word we're working on now is the Hebrew word "nephesh" which in our English translations of the Bible gets translated as "soul." But...

Tim: It is actually hardly ever the meaning of the soul in the Bible.

Jon: How do biblical authors use this word "nephesh"? What are they imagining? And what does it mean for us as humans to be a soul? Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

We are going to talk about the soul - the human's soul.

Tim: Because this is what we like to do on an average day. Talk about biblical words.

Jon: I'm incredibly excited about these conversations.

Tim: The motivator is in the word study series we're doing a video on the fifth keyword in the Shema. Deuteronomy Chapter 6: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul, and then with all your strength." Right now, for us, real-time, "soul" is the next one to come out in the month and a half, two. There you go.

We're having the conversation about the meaning of this highly misunderstood word in the Bible. Why are you so interested in this? I feel like you have been for a long time.

Jon: Yeah.

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Tim: Where does that come from?

Jon: I'm really interested in the human experience. I've always been confused by what we mean when we say soul, how that's different from spirit. I remember talking to a guy I really admire as a thinker, as a Christian. He was talking about, your body, your psyche, your soul, and your spirit. And it seemed like he had these really clear categories in his mind. And I'm like, "I don't have that clear of categories."

I mean, I understand "body." That's really clear. "Psyche" starts to get a little less clear or "mind," but kind of have a handle on that. Then "soul," it gets really blurry.

But I have this fairly typical understanding of your essence - this disembodied essence that you have, that you will carry on with you forever. It seems like that's typically what people are talking about when they mean soul.

Tim: Yeah. Then that gets complicated. I think, for many people, when they encounter popular presentations of brain science or neuroscience, things that are able to explain what often or historically has been understood as nonphysical, something like mind or reason, and then there's a whole movement that says, "No, actually, even what we can experience as not being a part of our bodies like our thoughts are actually products of synapses firing and chemicals mixing in our brain."

Jon: It's material.

Tim: It's material, I think for many people that creates maybe some sort of crisis, or at least attention and their worldview. "Wait, I thought humans were both material, but also something non material. How does that work then?"

Jon: I think most people would say, "Yeah, we're material and non material." But then if you really try to drill down and get a handle on what that non material part is, it's a complete mystery.

Tim: People often assume that the idea of eternal nonphysical existence that human's living on after death apart from their bodies, as souls, disembodied souls forever and ever, many people assume that that's a really important idea in the Bible or a main teaching of the Bible. I certainly thought that till I actually started to read the Bible.

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I remember even before I knew anything about Greek or Hebrew, and I became aware that the word "soul" was being used in the Bible not the way I used it in English, then as I learned more, I realized what most people mean by the word soul, that disembodied living on forever and ever part of you, is actually hardly ever the meaning of soul in the Bible if all. I realized it was a whole point of debate. You can count, on one hand, the key passages that seemed to describe that.

I think both it leaves a misunderstanding about the human person and also that idea has led us to miss understand much of what the Bible has said. I start to sound like a broken record at some point. There's a cultural gap between us and the Bible and its authors, and how they used words in their language and culture.

So it goes both ways. We impose our concepts of whatever on to these texts and make them say what they might mean in English. We're both distorting what they say. That happens very often. Also, we miss out on what they were trying to say in the first place. So it's a double whammy. We distort what they're actually saying and we miss what they wanted to say.

I have found that have to do both a demolition job and a rebuilding job when it comes to the word "soul" in the Bible.

Jon: Before we demo the word, I always like to try to understand how we got the word in English.

Tim: I have a bit in the notes but I'm sure you have more.

Jon: There it is. Sáwol. 8th-century old English word.

Tim: It was actually first attested in Beowulf. This is from the Oxford English Dictionary.

Jon: This is the first time that word shows up is in Beowulf?

Tim: Yeah. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it's first literary usage in a text that we can date to the 8th-century. What that means is that people were using it long before that; it can be tracked here.

Jon: And then got into literature. That's very clearly referring to some nonphysical essence of a living being?

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Tim: Correct.

Jon: So that was a category in the 8th-century English?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Now, in the etymology dictionary online, it says that it also might be a Proto-Germanic word and it may even come potentially from a German word that means see. Did you see that?

Tim: I did? There were other routes that people think are even older. This is just it's the first appearance in English.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: It seems like this word has existed in European languages, referring to a concept of a nonphysical disembodied you, the essence of you that is not physical, and therefore couldn't survive death.

Jon: Let's assume for the sake of argument because we haven't looked at the relevant verses yet, that the Bible actually isn't talking about some disembodied part of you when it talks about the soul. Where would that idea come from?

Tim: Well, the main concept it comes to us from Greek culture and philosophy. It's the classic idea in Plato and Aristotle of the immortal soul. They use the Greek word *psyche* to describe that, but it's eternal, nonphysical, it exists after death.

In fact, in the philosophy of these great teachers, the material world that you and I experience it's just a second-rate kind of shadow world, and the most pure, beautiful form of existence is nonphysical. For them, souls were actually all this language of "I'm a soul trapped in a body" or "your soul escaping the body" or "imprisoned in your body," that's all part of this heritage of—

Jon: From Plato and Aristotle?

Tim: Yeah, of Platonic philosophy. That your physical existence is less than, and what's true and real is what's not physical.

Tim: And they called it the *psyche*?

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Tim: They use the Greek word "psuche."

Jon: Which is close to "psyche," which is more "mind."

Tim: Exactly. Isn't that interesting? you'd have to track the history of how it's...because our word "psyche" in English is just that Greek word spelled with English letters.

Jon: But that refers more to our mind.

Tim: Now it refers more to our mind. Whereas in their philosophies, it was the essence of the human - the non material essence of a person.

Jon: It's very fascinating how cultures develop this idea of what we are as humans and what categories there are of our humanity. I think what we're interested in is what are the categories that the Bible presents and what it means with those categories.

Tim: As we're going to see both in the Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, there is a category that this word is going to be used for to describe the enduring human person after death. It's very rare. These words occur hundreds of times in the Bible and there's a small handful of times where it seems to pretty clearly refer to a human, but using the word human because human means body.

For us, the word human is also the body. But it's the endurance of a person, a living being through death always in the hope of resurrection or re-embodiment. But all that to say is there's at least kind of a crack in the door in the Bible for those Greek concepts to get imported in, creating the mess I think that we have today, which is reading these Greek ideas back into the biblical usage. But to get there, you have to kind of walk through the storyline of how this word develops its meaning.

[00:12:59]

Tim: Here's some basics about these words in the Bible. The English word "soul," if you do online Bible Gateway or Blue Letter Bible search, you can search the NIV translation, you'll see the English word "soul" appears nearly 100 times. That's a lot. The word soul appears a lot in your NIV translation.

Jon: Although for the Bible—

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- Tim: You think it would appear more?
- Jon: Oh, yeah? Is that the whole Bible or is that the Old Testament?
- Tim: Yeah. This search in the New International Version.
- Jon: In the Old and New Testament?
- Tim: In the Old Testament.
- Jon: In the Old Testament?
- Tim: Yeah.
- Jon: So we're talking like 40 something books? How many books in the Old Testament?
- Tim: 24.
- Jon: 24 books?
- Tim: I'm sorry. That's counting book of the 12 prophets. It's counting all the ones and twos as one.
- Jon: What does that get us to?
- Tim: 39 in the Protestant Bible?
- Jon: 46 in the Catholic.
- Tim: But once you combine the books in Hebrew tradition, you get 24.
- Jon: Okay. Let's say 24 for the Hebrew tradition. That means in every book the word "soul" only appear an average of four times.
- Tim: The English word soul.
- Jon: The English word soul. For a book, that's about—
- Tim: About what?
- Jon: Where you're going to go when you die.

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- Tim: All right, I see where you are going here.
- Tim: Like you think it would be more interested in your soul.
- Tim: Interesting. If the Bible is primarily telling us information about what happens after you die, so you can get ready for that...
- Jon: And what to do now.
- Tim: ...it's odd that the word soul doesn't appear [unintelligible 00:14:46].
- Jon: If I was writing the Bible, the word soul would show up a lot, I think.
- Tim: Famous last words.
- Jon: If I had my version of the Bible, there would be a lot more talk about your soul.
- Tim: Because you got to put these numbers in perspective. The English word soul appears just under 100 times in The New International Version. 72 of those times it's translating the Hebrew word "nephesh." So let's talk about the Hebrew word nephesh. The Hebrew word nephesh occurs 754 times in the Hebrew Bible.
- Jon: Now we're getting somewhere.
- Tim: Just stop and think about that. This Hebrew word is one of the most common words in biblical Hebrew other than God.
- Jon: What does that compare to? What other type of words are used 750 times?
- Tim: Oh, got it. It would be very common words like place or walk. Once you get like the word of God or see or said, then you're up in the thousands.
- Jon: The word nephesh, it appears 750 times in the Old Testament, but only 10% of the time, one out of 10 times is that word translated to soul.
- Tim: Remember, what translators are doing is they get a sense of the range of meaning of a word. Then in different contexts, the same word can have different nuances. It's true in every language. It's true in English. So depending on context, they'll use a different English word to get it a different nuance of meaning.

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I have this little chart in front of you. It's the standard, most common translations of the word nephesh. The most common English word actually that translates is the word "life." Life. Then second comes "soul." Then after that comes "me." Then comes "lives" or "living," the living, then the pronoun "I" Then "Heart."

Jon: Heart? That's an interesting choice.

Tim: Then "themselves," "you," "people," "anyone." Then the chart shades off. There are about 50 other different English words that are used to translate it to really niche context words.

Here's the point. This word is really plastic and broad. What we want to get at is examine that broad usage to get at the core ideas underneath, and then see how these are all legitimate...

[crosstalk 00:17:37]

Jon: It's kind of like opa! in Greek. Opa! It means all these different things. I remember I was in Greece and I was trying to figure what it meant, and I asked this guy, like, "What does it mean?" He goes, "Just pay attention, and you'll figure it out."

Tim: He didn't tell you?

Jon: No.

Tim: He was like, "Just watch how people use it?"

Jon: Sometimes it's oops, sometimes it's stop, sometimes it's like, "Hey, you." It's all sorts of things.

Tim: Opa. That's great. That's a great example. That's a good example.

Jon: It's a very plastic word.

Tim: Here you go. It's a very broad word. All languages have broad words. Actually, the English word "life" is fairly broad. I can talk about my physical life or all my life, meaning years - all the years I've been alive. I can talk about get a life - Just like have a social network.

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Let's run with this a little bit. It's a good example. Think of the pie chart we make. So life, it would be physical existence, the length of your existence, like time duration.

Jon: Quality of your existence.

Tim: The quality of your existence.

Jon: It could also just mean organic compounds.

Tim: Oh, yeah, like biological life. It can refer to your social network. Get a life meaning get some friends. Not on your life. Not on your life. Like the worth or the value of your life. Your life has a value.

Jon: The value of your being.

Tim: We use the word life in really different ways.

Jon: And that's similar to nephesh?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Because it actually is one of the translations of nephesh.

Tim: It's one of the translations. That's what made me think of it.

Jon: Got it. That's helpful.

Tim: Here are some famous Bible verses where nephesh occurs that to me raise some of the interesting questions. One of the most famous Bible verses in American popular culture, Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my nephesh."

Jon: My soul.

Tim: He refreshes my nephesh.

Jon: That verse is usually translated to soul.

Tim: Yeah, he refreshes my soul. He spreads a table before my enemies, that kind of thing. Now it's interesting "the Lord's my shepherd. He makes me lie down

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in green pastures, quiet waters" what's the governing metaphor obviously is that the me of the poet is a sheep.

Then if I'm a sheep in this poem, what does it mean that I eat green grass and drink water? My nephesh is refreshed. Or just it raises the issue like, "Oh, soul." The normal meaning of the English word soul really helps us understand the imagery of the poem.

Jon: It almost seems like he's turning corner here and you'd expect him to say like, he takes care of my body but said he refreshes my soul. Which makes it feel like he's getting really spiritual.

Tim: Totally. If we said he refreshes my body, it would feel less biblish.

Jon: I'm laying down in green pastures, that's cozy. I'm drink drinking these quiet waters, it's refreshing. And so now my body's...it's like...But now my soul is refreshed.

Tim: My soul. By saying soul in English—

Jon: But this is a metaphor. We're not sheep.

Tim: Sure.

Jon: It's not too surprising that he would say, soul.

Tim: Psalm 42. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my nephesh pants for you, my God. My nephesh thirsts for God, for the living God." You have a panting deer that is likened to my nephesh panting for God. If you have a deer panting by a stream of water, it's likely going to be...

Jon: It's thirsty.

Tim: It's thirsty. Then the poet develops a metaphor. My nephesh thirsts. It both pants and thirsts for God. So God is depicted as a source of life that can, similar to Psalm 23, refresh. In the same way, the water can refresh the physical something, so God can refresh and bring life to a nephesh.

We might be tempted to say, "Oh, sure, waters is physical, God is Spirit so he refreshes the nonphysical part of me." That's what we think this might be saying. It's what it is actually that saying?

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If you look in all the standard Hebrew dictionaries, they'll all point out there's a number of times where nephesh is used in its most basic meaning, which is throat.

Jon: Its most basic meaning? By most basic you don't mean translated the most because that's life?

Tim: That's right.

Jon: What do you mean by most basic?

Tim: This often happens. Do you remember when we talked about glory and—

Jon: And wait.

Tim: Its most basic meaning is heavy or weighty. What you're looking for is a nuance of meaning that can explain conceptually to be like the conceptual bedrock for all the other nuances of meaning. It's not like the word originally met this and over time it developed. It's that, of all the ranges of meaning for how this word get used, this one it's the one that connects them all together.

Jon: Throat doesn't seem to connect them at all?

Tim: That's why this is such a great conversation. I remember being so bewildered when I learned Hebrew.

Jon: Who decided it meant throat?

Tim: People who looked at all the uses of nephesh in the Bible, and they found instances like this. Numbers Chapter 11. The Israelites are in the wilderness saying...This is great. This is one of their complaints in the wilderness. They say, "Who will give us meat to eat. We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic. But now our nephesh has dried up and there's nothing to look at except this manna."

What God goes on to do is to give them meat in this story, and then it's paralleled with the story soon after about God providing water for them. This becomes the complaint that governs God's response which is to give them food and then water. But our nephesh has dried up.

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Jon: Our soul has dried up.

Tim: Such an interesting metaphor. Our nephesh is dry.

Jon: Obviously, he's not talking about a disembodied entity because they're talking about how hungry and thirsty they are?

Tim: Yeah. Whatever their nephesh is, their nephesh—

Jon: They're not using it as a metaphor.

Tim: Their nephesh being dry is a description of their hunger and thirst. Interesting. English translations go different ways here. The New American Standard translates that as "our appetite is gone." So they basically have paraphrased it so you no longer even know the word nephesh is being used there. Appetite.

What part of the body dries up when you're hungry or thirsty? I mean, it's fairly intuitive.

Jon: Your throat.

Tim: Yeah, your throat. I don't know why they didn't say, "Look, our throat is parched or our throat is dry." Isaiah chapter 58. This is a promise on the other side of exile what God is going to do when He restores His people.

In Isaiah 58:11, "The Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your nephesh in scorched places, giving strength to your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that never fails." This is like post-apocalyptic - Babylon just burned your whole countryside and cities to the ground. Is there anything to hope for? And God says, yes, He's going to satisfy your nephesh in these scorched places. What does that mean? Strength to bones and lots of water.

Jon: You'll be like a watered garden.

Tim: That's right. He's flipping the metaphor. Your nephesh itself will be restored and then you will be a source of restoration for elsewhere in the land. He goes on. "And you're going to rebuild the cities and rebuild the ancient ruins and so on. So your nephesh will be restored and then you will become a source of restoration for others.

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But once again, it's this image of dry and nephesh, and then the opposite of it is these very visceral physical images. Bones and water. Let's keep going. Go down to these two alternate translates Psalm 69. These are the ones when I read these and I was like, "Oh, I see what's going on here."

The opening sentence of Psalm 69. Actually, depending on what translation you're reading, it will affect what you get out of here. In the New American Standard, the poet says, "Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life."

Jon: Threatened my nephesh.

Tim: Threatened my nephesh. There you go. The NIV has a different translation. Then what it shows us is that the New American Standard has once again kind of paraphrased out of existence the original metaphor here.

NIV reads, "Save me, O God, the waters have come up to my nephesh. That's literally, in Hebrew, the waters have gone up to the nephesh.

Jon: So if nephesh just meant life and it was a metaphor or soul, then you would say, what does that mean that the waters have come up to your soul? I guess you're just kind of threatened so we'll paraphrase it "they've threatened my life."

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But NIV is saying, "Oh, nephesh actually, in a basic way, just refers to your neck," and that's what he's using it as neck.

Tim: But it is a metaphor. He's describing inactive drowning as what his life feels like. And he's going to go on to say, "Enemies are after me and they're slandering me in public." Drowning is a metaphor for just a really, really bad day in the life of the poet. But the metaphor he uses is a literal description of drowning. Water is coming up to the nephesh.

So your nephesh can be dry when you're hungry and thirsty, or you can drown - waters coming up to your nephesh. Or in that example, and Psalm 105 describing Joseph when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. It's, again, different translations here.

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In the New American Standard, "Joseph was sold as a slave. They, his brothers afflicted his feet with fetters. He himself was laid up in irons. That's how the New American Standard reads."

New International Version. "Joseph was sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles. His nephesh was put into irons. It's literally what it says in Hebrew. So he has shackles on his feet and then he has a big neck shackle around his nephesh.

Jon: So nephesh clearly can refer to your throat, your neck?

Tim: Yes.

Jon: I still understand why that's the most basic.

Tim: These are the only times that nephesh is referring to a specific part of the body. Clearly, it's referring to your neck, but not...your neck like Joseph. Your neck is put in irons. Then what t you have is references to your nephesh being dry and thirsty...

Jon: It's the same word for neck and throat, nephesh?

Tim: That's right. Those are other words for neck and for throat.

Jon: Oh, really?

Tim: Mm-hmm. Nephesh is somehow referring to it as a holistic whole.

Jon: There's a Hebrew word for neck and there's a Hebrew word for throat and then there's nephesh, which refers to as a whole.

Tim: As a whole. As we're going to see, it can sometimes refer to just the physical piece of flesh around what you could put a shackle, or what we would call the esophagus is the nephesh. But your esophagus is really important, like really, really important as your whole body.

This is where you can also refer to nephesh as a metaphor to describe what goes in and out of your throat. This is interesting in light of some of the conversations we've had about ruach before. This is number two on the handout.

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The example of Jeremiah 15:9, he describes how terrifying it's going to be to live in Jerusalem when Babylon comes to town. He says, "It'll be like a woman who gave birth to seven sons but she'll breathe out her nephesh. Her son will go down while it's still day." To breath out is the verb form of the noun naphach. It's the same thing that God does to the lump of clay in Genesis 2.

Jon: Those have similar roots then? Naphach and nephesh?

Tim: No, sorry. It's a different root word. He's using it for alliteration. Poetically.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: Naphach or nephesh, the first two letters are the same. Nephesh here refers to what goes in and out of your throat, namely breath, which is how most English translations go. "She breathes out her last."

Jon: Oh. So it's she's not breathing out of her neck, she's breathing out her life.

Tim: She's dying. She's describing a woman who's given life to others, but now her life is going out of her. She breathes out her nephesh.

Jon: That makes it seem like some disembodied.

Tim: It makes it seem like spirit - ruach. Remember like Venn diagrams for words here. Ruach refers to the invisible energy that can go out of you. Nephesh, in all these uses that we've looked at, it's referring to the body part.

Your ruach goes in and out of your nephesh. But nephesh can refer to the physical thing. It can also refer to the passageway in and out. The nephesh goes in and out of your body, that's like your life. So your lifeline.

Jon: I think we're going to lose people with the ruach thing. Ruach, it means breath or spirit or wind. But it can mean your life breathe. And God gives you ruach and He can take it away. So breathing out your ruach is a very typical thing...

Tim: For death. For dying. In the Bible, you give up your ruach.

Jon: Yeah, it's a phrase that's used. Here's the poetic metaphor of a woman breathing out her...and what you would expect is breathe. But what she breathes out is her nephesh.

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Jon: It is a weird thing to say, like, I'm dying. I am breathing out my neck."

Tim: It doesn't work in English.

Jon: It doesn't work. It makes me feel like I don't have a head and I'm just breathing out my neck.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: It's like, "Is that what you're talking about?"

Tim: Something's developing here, where you nephesh is your throat and breathe and food come in and out.

Jon: Yeah, it's very connected to breathe because that's where your breath comes in, is your throat.

Tim: That's right. But now here's a sense in which we're connected still to the throat - you breathe out. But now nephesh is being abstracted to refer to your life. As we're going to see, that is actually the most common main usage of this word is just to refer to physical life.

Jon: So this is basic meaning of the word. And by basic, meaning it's the most plain, it's the most concrete meaning?

Tim: It's the most concrete, it refers to an actual physical body part.

Jon: Yeah, it refers to something physical.

Tim: And from that, we can abstract out and understand how all the other meanings are linked together.

Jon: And that way, is it kind of like hearts, the way that we use in English? I was thinking about this because we did the heart video.

The the fact that we use the organ heart to represent feelings, if you are an alien from outer space looking at that, you'd just be like, what? "Why is that organ that's pumping blood, how did that become the abstracted idea of the embodiment of your feelings and emotions?" It makes no sense. I'm sitting here going, "How does your throat become abstracted idea of life in your personhood? That doesn't make any sense."

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Tim: That's what's happening there.

Jon: But actually it makes more sense because you breathe in and out of your throat and it connects your ruach to your body. It's a support and passageway. So you have this essential passageway in your body?

Tim: Yes. One of the most essential parts of your existence.

Jon: A very delicate part of your body too.

Tim: Yeah, yeah.

Jon: It's very essential. If you were to choose a body part to abstract away just in general...

Tim: Just represent your physical life.

Jon: ...your physical life, that would be a good contender. It's not like this was chosen by committee or anything, but I'm just imagining like a committee sitting down and being like, "Guys, I think we're going with heart. We're going to go with that organ. It makes the most sense. It's red. It beats. I feel pain in there sometimes in anguish. I think this is the best one to go with."

Tim: Another great example is the word intestines in biblical Hebrew. There are a couple of times. Once, where a guy gets stabbed in the stomach with the end of the spear and his intestines spills out. Gross.

Jon: It's gross.

Tim: But the word occurs many other times, but it's almost never translated intestines. It's translated my inward being. It's because it's almost always used in metaphors of anger, anxiety, or fear or strong affection. It's another one of these examples where talking about...We call that a queasy stomach. It's a physiological response that our bodies have when we have extreme emotion.

Jon: Nausea.

Tim: Nausea or just queasiness or butterflies. Try and explain that to an alien. I have butterflies in my stomach. In biblical Hebrew, that's just where you feel strong, your most intense emotions - in your guts. So when you want to

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describe your physical existence as a whole, as we're going to see, you use the word [unintelligible 00:39:03].

Jon: But there's a word for body already.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Which is what?

Tim: They are few. There's bizarre, which means flesh. You can describe the meat of an animal or you can describe your bodily existence. Then in Greek, there are a few words too. Soma is the most common Greek word in the New Testament.

Jon: Why wouldn't they just use that word instead of using some new fancy word and turning it into this idea of your body?

Tim: Well, body is talking about the meat on me that's different than my vital sense organs. The throat's connected to my head and my torso, and so there's the sense of it, the centrality of this part of my body to my whole existence. If you talk to me, you don't look at my hand. You look at this thing supported by my nephesh; my head and my face.

Jon: That's interesting. So like, you've got the sense of where you're looking from and hearing from. It's all up here in your head, which is connected to your body with your nephesh, which is then connected to this really central part of you, your chest, where your breathing and your heart is. You get stabbed anywhere in this region, head down to here, you're in trouble. It's over. It's game over. So this is like the most central part of you in that way.

Tim: It wouldn't make any sense to have a word that means my physical existence. You wouldn't develop a meaning out of bicep. But throat, there's something essential about the throat. The essence.

Jon: So does it mean like the essence of me then?

Tim: We have to keep going. It does mean the essence of a person but it doesn't mean nonphysical. Actually, nephesh primarily refers to me as a physical organism, a living physical organism. It's one of the great ironies of Bible translations is that the English word soul primarily means a nonphysical essence. Whereas the biblical word nephesh primarily means your physical

You are a soul

essence. The opposite. Which is why when you start tracking with these appearances of the word soul in the Old Testament, you'd be like, "Oh, that doesn't mean a nonphysical part." My soul pants after you. Onward?

Jon: Onward.

[00:42:33]

Tim: Because a body part then can come to symbolize your life essence as a physical being, it seems this is how the nephesh can refer to then me as a whole physical embodied being. For example, one of the most common phrases for somebody trying to kill you is "they seek my nephesh."

When David has been hunted by Saul in the wilderness, he gets reports, "Saul is seeking your nephesh." In English, you'll know you're at this phrase whenever anybody is seeking someone's life. This is why life is one of the most common translations. "Seeking your life."

To murder somebody is to strike their nephesh. When Joseph gets kidnapped by his brothers, and what they want to do is kill him, but they end up throwing him in the pit instead because his brother Reuben said, "What? Don't strike his nephesh." That's a good example.

To strike my nephesh doesn't mean...is very opposite of saying, don't strike the nonphysical part of his body." It doesn't make any sense.

Jon: Sure. Yeah, it doesn't make any sense. You know how in planes, the flight attendants will say, "There are 300 souls on board." Now, you could say they're referring to the nonphysical part of you to be like, "Hey, these people are really important," but what they're really referring to is that there are 300 people.

Tim: That's right.

Jon: But they're using the essence of them to communicate that. Why couldn't Joseph brother be doing the same thing? Like, "I'm going to use the word that represents the most important part of him, the permanent part of him, his nephesh, if it did mean soul in the sense that we understand it?"

You are a soul

- Tim: Part of it is actually that because of the King James translation, the King James translation rendered many of these occurrences of nephesh as soul. They clearly mean the physical embodied person.
- Jon: In King James?
- Tim: In King James.
- Jon: Because that's what it meant back then? It had that double meaning in this sense?
- Tim: I actually think the King James influenced the history of the English language. In other words, through the King James, the Hebrew meaning of nephesh ended up entering the English usage for a time. And it survives in—
- Jon: I see.
- Tim: It survives—
- Jon: Like in pilot talk.
- Tim: In like, whenever a leader of some kind of vessel describes how many humans are on board, they'll say, "There's 200 souls."
- Jon: So the Hebrew meaning of soul—
- Tim: Influenced the history of the English language.
- Jon: Then in the English word soul typically meant more disembodied from that Beowulf. Now, all of a sudden they realize, "Oh, this means actually more than that." And then that usage slipped in when it became captains of ships.
- Tim: Yeah. And that nuance of meaning has all but died out in common English usage, except when we're describing how many people were on a boat or a plane. That's interesting?
- Jon: It's interesting.
- Tim: Boats and planes.
- Jon: So they're not just being spiritual up on planes and in boats?

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Tim: No, no. It's a remnant of 500-year-old English influenced by the King James Bible. There's lots of stuff like this.

Jon: That's the word nephesh in normal day English.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. That's an example of a great biblical use of nephesh in normal English. "There are 272 souls aboard." There you go. The embodied life.

Here's something that's interesting. This is point four. You can say you can strike someone's nephesh. It's their embodied life. It's not just humans, though. On Page 1 one of the Bible, the waters teem with living nephesh. "Let the waters teem with living nephesh."

Then, later on, let the land produce living nephesh. First, it's sea creatures, now its land animals. and then in Genesis 2, God breathed into the Adam - the human's nostrils—

Jon: He nephashed.

Tim: Yeah, the breath of life, and the human became a living nephesh. So this is something humans share in common with all of the creatures that we are a nephesh.

Jon: That's interesting.

Tim: So humans don't have a nephesh. Humans along with animals are a nephesh. I didn't make that up. That's a summary I read in dictionary somewhere. But that was helpful for me.

Jon: We should have started there, Genesis 1 and 2. I feel like this whole term like...I don't know. I feel like this could be a big misunderstanding. But here in Genesis 1, the waters we're teaming with living nephesh, the land produced living nephesh, and then God breathed into man's nostrils, man being Adam there, and the man became a living nephesh. That's obviously not talking about a soul.

Tim: Correct. The human becomes animated by God's ruach and God's breathe or spirit and that whole conversation we had a long time ago. When you are animated by the gift of divine like all living creatures are animated by God's Spirit, then what are you and what is the bird and what is the [salmon?]? We are living nephesh. That is what we are.

You are a soul

Jon: This is dismantling my concept of the human experience, the human person.

Tim: We're not done yet. We're hopefully starting to rebuild the point.

Jon: Well, I think the demo's almost complete. I mean, this picture of God takes Adam dirt...Literally dirt. Is that what that word means, right? He takes dirt, he breathes in it His ruach and then we become a living nephesh in the same way that a fish or an animal's living nephesh. That is the biblical kind of anatomy in a way or the biblical sense of who you are. And nowhere in there is some sacred spirit or soul. I mean, you have the breath of life, God's breath —

Tim: That's right. Well, that's not you. That's an animated energy. That keeps you alive. That's right.

Jon: And what's already you have left? You have dirt that's now living soul. "Great. I'm organic compound walking around animated by God's breath. That's a lot less sexy than I'd like it to be.

Tim: I don't know. It's very earthy and it's intuitive, I think.

Jon: Yes. But it's just not the category I had in my mind.

Tim: Sure. Well, I'll give you that.

Jon: It's not as mysterious or something. It's very kind of like, "Oh." It feels...I don't know. "I'm dirt animated by God's breath."

Tim: Then the estimation of pages 1 and 2...

Jon: I want to think of myself as more than that.

Tim: Well, you are. You're God's royal representative. You're a remarkable creature that has the unique capacity enrolled.

Jon: But I could build a robot and tell him, "Now you're my image and go do my job for me." But now it's just metal and circuits. I feel like what makes me feel special and more than just a robot or an animal is this idea of having a soul. Like the Pinocchio thing of like, you're a puppet, and now I'm going to endow you into this—

You are a soul

Tim: This is interesting. Genesis 1 puts animals and humans on a spectrum. And what makes humans different is not that they have a soul. They're all living nephesh.

What sets the humans apart is their capacity and responsibility to represent God in God's creative, gracious rule. So you feel like you're getting demoted does to become more animal like?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And where it's funny, I think the intention of Genesis 1 is the opposite.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: Is promote humans to a special role that they are both like the animals, they come from and go back to the same place, but they have a different role and responsibility. I'm trying to understand what is...it's just your categories are getting reshuffle.

Jon: If one of those categories is this nonphysical part of me that lives on forever, that represents the real essence of who I am, the real me, and it's kind of infused into this body, but can also be separated from the body, if I begin to identify with that thing - and that's the thing that I feel like is the deepest, most meaningful part of me - when I use the word soul, I mean the deepest me. Now you're telling me, "No, you don't have that."

Tim: Or just the thing that is that is deeply connected to your physical embodied existence. It's not separate from your embodied existence.

Jon: It's inseparable?

Tim: It's inseparable. That's right. This is why the ultimate hope for humans in the Bible is not living a disembodied existence. It's resurrection. It's embodied existence, which is having a nephesh.

The end of this biblical story is nepheshes - embodied humans inhabiting an embodied physical world. Anyway, that's to get ahead of ourselves for the moment. And the conversations on over.

For the moment, you're right. The reorientation that has to take place is that humans do not have a soul. At least in the Old Testament, humans are a

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nephesh. They are a soul. Soul is our English word translating Hebrew word that describes me as a whole living, breathing physical organism.

Jon: Or your neck.

Tim: Or your neck.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. Tim and I will continue this conversation on the next episode. If you enjoyed this podcast, you might also enjoy Tim's podcast called "Exploring my Strange Bible." It's a collection of his sermons and teachings from over the last decade.

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