

Nephesh/Soul P2

Let's Get Physical

Podcast Date: November 26, 2017

(27:55)

Speakers in the audio file:

Jon Collins

Tim Mackie

Let's Get Physical

Jon: This is Jon from The Bible Project. Today on this episode of the podcast, we're going to continue a conversation that we began in our last episode. We're talking about the Hebrew word "nephesh" and how this word is often translated in the Bible as "soul." Now, what do you think of when you think of a soul?

Well, if you're like me, you probably think of some sort of eternal disembodied existence - some part of you that continues on after that.

Tim: People often assume that the idea of an eternal nonphysical existence, humans living on after death apart from their bodies, 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. Then as I learned more, I realized what most people mean by the word "soul" is actually hardly ever the meaning of the "soul" in the Bible.

Jon: That's a pretty wild claim that might be coming out of left field for you, in which case, you could go back and listen to us unpack that idea in the first half of this conversation in the last episode. But if you don't want to do that, here's what you need to know.

The story of the Bible isn't about becoming a disembodied soul. The story of the Bible is about becoming resurrected people in a new creation. Now, this doesn't mean that the Bible doesn't talk about life after death and what happens before the resurrection. It's just that it rarely talks about it.

Tim: There is a category that this word can 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 pretty clearly referred to a person, a living being through death, but always in the hope of resurrection or re-embodiment.

Jon: God made us from the dirt and He called it good. He made us living nephesh. Being a nephesh is all about the embodied life.

Tim: Nephesh is capturing your body, which is you, essentially you, the living you, your life, your physical embodied existence.

Jon: In this next episode, we're going to get physical.

Let's Get Physical

Tim: Song of Songs, the erotic love poetry in the Bible. "All night long on my bed I looked for the one my nephesh loves." Your nephesh can long for your lover.

Jon: The Song of Songs is a book that makes a lot of us blush. It seems really carnal and unspiritual. But for Hebrew thinkers, having your body, your physical existence long for another, that's a good thing.

Tim: On Page 1 of the Bible, the physical world is good. As we're going to see, it's compromised but it is in its essence good. If I'm talking about hunger or sex as in this case, that's good, but somehow we've spiritualized this biblical mindset.

Jon: Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

Tim: This is a very uncommon use at the top of Page 6. Calling somebody a "living nephesh" is a way to refer to them just as a "living creature." In Leviticus 21, one of the things that if you touch it you become ritually impure for a time, and sometimes it's just called corpse, but one time the corpse is called a dead nephesh.

If you touch a dead nephesh, you become ritually impure. And so very clearly it means a nephesh that's no longer alive. Here, it's talking about a human who is a nephesh and they're dead. All the English translations say, "A dead body," but literally, it says, "a dead nephesh." There you go.

Nowhere in the Old Testament, you get this concept of humans as souls trapped in bodies. It's the very opposite that humans are what they are, and then through their bodies. This opens up a whole bunch, probably 100 or more uses of nephesh that just get translated as "person."

Jon: Your nephesh is your person.

Tim: Your nephesh is your person. When Jacob takes his family down to Egypt in Genesis chapter 46, all his sons and daughters were 33 nepheshes. Just people. This is my favorite.

In the book of Numbers, a murderer is called a nephesh slayer, and a kidnapper is called a nephesh thief. To kidnap a human is to steal their nephesh. A nephesh thief. There you go. Just person. You steal people, you killed people, it just means the person.

Let's Get Physical

Jon: There's a word for using a part of something to me in the whole thing.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Is it a metonymy?

Tim: There are two nerdy words. Metonymy and synecdoche. Synecdoche is where you use a part of something to refer to a whole. So, yeah, nephesh is a synecdoche.

Jon: You're using this idea of a neck to refer to your whole being?

Tim: Mm-hmm.

Jon: And then what's the other one?

Tim: Metonymy where you use something closely associated to refer to that.

Jon: Here's what's interesting. Here's what I think is happening in my brain. When I read something like nephesh slayer, and I think of that as a soul slayer, I think of it as a metonymy and that I'm using something related to your body. I'm really meaning I'm slashing your body, but I'm using something related, which is your soul, which is actually more essential and I'm really slashing that. So I'm using metonymy.

So I read that and I think, "Oh, it's a metonymy." But it's really a synecdoche.

Tim: Part for the whole. That's an English phrase.

Jon: I don't know if this is helping.

Tim: Synecdoche?

Jon: It's helping me.

Tim: Yeah, sure. You can call your car "my wheels."

Jon: Yes.

Tim: Refer to people by particular body part. Did you get a headcount? How many heads?

Jon: How many heads? That's a synecdoche.

Let's Get Physical

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So nephesh. How many throats do we get here? Meaning, how many living beings. That's a synecdoche.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Now let's think of the word "soul" the way we're used to it - this disembodied, more central part of you. If you say how many souls on board and you mean they're different body parts, it really refers to the physical part. Where you say, I'm a soul slayer, meaning I kill people, you're using it as a metonymy.

That's what's so confusing to me is I can read all these things as metonymies and they still make sense. And I have to kind of flip it. And I'm so used to reading it that way, so I read nephesh slayer, and I think, "yeah, soul slayer. It's just a metonymy." I don't use that word in my head because I don't know how to pronounce it. But that's the category I'm using. Does that make sense?

Tim: Totally. It's actually really helpful for me. I've never thought about that.

Jon: But to be a nephesh slayer is to say...it's also interesting just like slang someone's neck. That's a very common way to kill someone too. So to be after someone, to seek someone's nephesh, to seek their life, it makes sense. It's a very intuitive way to try to kill someone.

Tim: That's right. It's actually a really intuitive way of saying life or a living person.

Jon: So I start saying soul slayer? "I'm a neck slayer."

[00:09:00]

Tim: Where do we start? We went to throat, then we went to living physical being. Now the layers are getting more and more general. Then it can just be person. Just human. Person. Then we go out further, and that's the broadest - most broad. It's the use of nephesh that you'll never see it in your English translations because usually, it's a way of referring to oneself.

Let's Get Physical

There are Hebrew words for I, you, me, he, her, them. But in Hebrew, when you want to emphasize "them" and "their whole physical self," you say, "my nephesh" or "her nephesh" or "their nephesh." And it's very common.

Isaiah 1, God says, "My nephesh hates your religious festivals: Sabbath, New Moon."

Jon: So He could have just said "I hate your religious festival?"

Tim: Yes.

Jon: But He says, "My nephesh."

Tim: It's depicting God as physically angry. "My whole being hates this thing you're doing." In Genesis 27, Isaac says to Esau, "Hey, give me some of that tasty food that I love. Give it to me to eat so that my nephesh may bless you before I die."

Jon: That can kind of go both ways. It's about food.

Tim: Exactly. Exactly. You'll often see that it's using context where my physical existence and things necessary for my physical existence. "Give me food, my nephesh will bless you." This happens over 40 times in the book of Psalms where the poet will say, "My nephesh cries out to you."

Let's go all the way back to these famous Psalm 42. "As the deer pants for the water so my nephesh pants after you. My nephesh thirsts." You can see actually he's doing a word play on the double meaning of nephesh. What thirsts? What part of your body gets thirsty? Your throat. But my soul thirsts for what? For God. So my body, my whole physical existence is what longs for God who gave me life in the first place.

So you can use both sentences. My nephesh can mean me, but "me" is kind of a weakened tweak because they have perfectly good Hebrew words for just "me." So when they say my nephesh, they're emphasizing "my being," "my existence."

Jon: What do we say? I think sometimes we use the word "soul" to mean that.

Tim: I think that's true. You're not necessarily talking about the part of me that survives after death. What you mean is "me and my core."

Let's Get Physical

Jon: The things I care about the most, my deepest passions, sense of self is my soul.

Tim: My soul felt alive. My soul was awakened. You really spoke to my soul. That's right. That's an English usage of the word that doesn't mean—

Jon: It could also mean - and I think that's what's confusing is when you say that, you're not saying that because you're thinking about this disembodied part of yourself necessarily. But we've been trained with that framework, so it's connected to that.

Tim: So then we think, "Oh, well, the most essential part of me is that nonmaterial eternal." But again it's more intuitive in this context. There are so many examples of it. The Song of Songs, the erotic love poetry in the Bible. "All night long on my bed I looked for the one my nephesh loves." I mean, need I say more? It's very clear what that means.

Jon: I don't know. I can read it either way in my head but I'm still with struggling these categories. My soul loves my bride. Yeah, sure.

Tim: But where does my nephesh want to love all night long on my bed? It's very clear that was referring to our physical relationship.

Jon: Yeah. Or he's just being spiritual while also being—

Tim: This is the female beloved speaking.

Jon: She's just a very spiritual woman.

Tim: So funny. Not so common. This is a very earthy physical image, physical desire. Your nephesh can long for God - Psalm 42. Your nephesh can long for your lover - Songs of Songs chapter 3.

Jon: But granted that can work for just soul and the old category of like, "The things are part of me that I care the most about longs for you because I love you." Long for God.

Tim: Sure, sure. But I think what we do then is we screen out. There's a whole worldview getting screened out here. And it's that if you don't import these Greek categories onto the Bible, you find yourself on Page 1 of the Bible that the physical world is good.

Let's Get Physical

As we're going to see it's compromised but it is in its essence, good. Which is why it needs to be redeemed and brought to the next stage of what God has planned for it. If I'm talking about hunger or sex as in this case, that's good. But somehow we've spiritualized this biblical mindset. And so what we really think it means to love is for my...I don't know, the core of me, which is not physical.

Jon: Yeah, that's carnal.

Tim: It's carnal. It's temporary. It's second rate. And that's so foreign.

Jon: So if I were to communicate that I'm a good Christian, and I'm on a bed with my lady, I would say not like, "Hey, babe, my body really wants you." That wouldn't sound very spiritual.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: I would be like, "Hey, I love you. You're my soulmate." Then all of a sudden, it's like, oh, you take this really seriously. But you're telling me and Hebrew, it's just kind of the same word. Like, "My nephesh longs for you. My body, which is the most important part of me, it is me. Me wants you." And in this instance, it's going to get a little physical.

Tim: That's right. And that's good.

Jon: And that's good.

Tim: That's Page 1 of the Bible. It's good. So funny we're both like—

Jon: Kind of dancing around.

Tim: We're kind of getting squirmy but just because we've been trained to somehow think that this is inappropriate or because it's physical it's not spiritual. And that's just so foreign.

Jon: There's a lot of hip hop songs that are now a lot more religious.

Tim: I'm not saying that. I'm just saying. You're right. You get the point.

Jon: I get the point.

Tim: There's a whole book of the Bible.

Let's Get Physical

Jon: But we don't read that book.

Tim: There you go. There's many, many uses of this nephesh to refer to your whole physical being.

[00:17:24]

Tim: Here's the interesting one. Proverbs 12:10. "The righteous person knows the nephesh of their animal, but the wicked, even their mercy is cruel." So good.

Jon: The righteous person knows the nephesh of their animal. I don't know what that means - the nephesh of their animal.

Tim: Well, I think farming culture. Your domesticated animals. You care for your animals.

Jon: I'm caring for my animals?

Tim: Yeah. Their nephesh, you take care of them. But nephesh, this is an emphasis on their physical existence. You brush your horse's mane and you clean up their pens so they don't have to walk in their own poop all the time.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: Then the wicked - notice this is treatment of animals. Treatment of animals is one of the criteria for being the righteous or the wicked. How you treat your animals. They're nephesh. That's fascinating.

Exodus 23. "Don't oppress the immigrant for you know the nephesh of the immigrant. You used to be immigrants in the land of Egypt."

Jon: You know the identity of the immigrants.

Tim: You know the being.

Jon: The essence of immigrants.

Tim: And being enslaved under forced labor, that's a very physical form of oppression.

Jon: It's like to have the body of an immigrant.

Let's Get Physical

- Tim: Yes, the body of slave. You know that embodied existence and so don't you ever repeat that in the history of Israel. All of a sudden, these passages I had in my mind they just get more rich than they already were in the first place.
- Jon: Yeah. So in all these passages, there are different words for nephesh being translated, I'm sure, depending on the translation.
- Tim: Exactly.
- Jon: Grab Exodus 23:9. "All of you know the nephesh of the immigrant."
- Tim: New International Version says, "You yourselves know how it feels to be a foreigner." ESV, English Standard Version, "You know the heart of the sojourner."
- Jon: That's why it was translated to "heart" sometimes. I was wondering about that. Heart.
- Tim: New American Standard. "You know, the feelings of a stranger." NRSV has the "heart." This is fascinating then. What they've done is they've taken the body part from modern Western conceptions of the body and replaced it—
- Jon: With the Hebrew version. Which is what a translator has to do.
- Tim: This right. I guess what would be, "You know the—
- Jon: Well, embodied existence.
- Tim: That's clunky. There you go. Translation is hard.
- Jon: You know what it is like to be an immigrant.
- Tim: You know what it's like. You know the life of an immigrant. But even that doesn't get you to—
- Jon: It's about empathy here in a way.
- Tim: That's right.
- Jon: You know what it feels like.
- Tim: You know what it feels like, yeah.

Let's Get Physical

Jon: I think that gets to what they're trying to say.

Tim: Going back to the Song of Songs, "All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves," says The New International Version. English Standard Version says, "I looked for the one my soul loves."

Jon: Spiritual version.

Tim: The English Spiritual Version? The ESV. Again, just to clarify, all these translations are incredible, produced by brilliant people. What they're all doing is struggling with how to best render into English in a foreign concept to us. I mean, who can blame them?

Not only do we quite have the right words in English, we just lack even the very categories of the human person that these authors had and that these words express. Is this too many examples?

Jon: No, not for me.

Tim: Here's what I want to do. I want to read most of Psalm 35 together. What this poet has done, is use the word "nephesh" seven times in the poem. The poet is exploiting different nuances of nephesh and it brings this richness to the poetry.

Psalm 35. "Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me: fight against those who fight against me. Take up shield and armor, arise, come to my aid. Brandish spear and javelin set against those who pursue me: say to my nephesh, 'God say this to me, I am your salvation.'"

This is a good example where my nephesh gets translated as me. "Say to my nephesh." But we're in this metaphorical thing of you're getting chased by armed assassins, your nephesh—

Jon: It's pretty important.

Tim: Yeah, totally. "My whole nephesh needs to hear that you're my savior right now. "May those who seek my nephesh..." Now, I want God to speak to my nephesh, but now these enemies, they're seeking my nephesh. That's a very standard phrase. That gets translated usually "my life." There are two uses of nephesh in back to back sentences, and in English, they get translated differently.

Let's Get Physical

"May those who seek my nephesh be disgraced, put to shame: may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay. Like chaff before the wind: the angel of the Lord driving them away. May their path be slippery: the angel of the Lord pursuing them. Because they hid their net from me without cause and without reason they dug a pit for my nephesh."

Jon: My body?

Tim: Yeah. Or me, but specifically for my whole body to fall into. The idea is they don't just want to kill me; they want my whole being.

Jon: Well, we don't have an English way of doing this. Do we?

Tim: No, we don't. "Body" doesn't work.

Jon: If I want to emphasize "my body" while I'm talking about myself, I just don't really have an easy way to do that.

Tim: Yeah. Nephesh is capturing your body, which is you, essentially you and it's the living you - your life, your physical embodied existence. Nephesh is the perfect word. Nephesh.

Jon: What about like, get off my back? That's like referring to me, my back?

Tim: Well, that's a good synecdoche.

Jon: Synecdoche to refer to you putting a burden on myself?

Tim: But your back just means get off my case. Like, leave me alone.

Jon: You can say leave me alone. And so you're saying, "Get off my off back."

Tim: That's right. "Me" and "back" become interchangeable there. Just like "nephesh" and "me" they're interchangeable here.

Jon: Right.

Tim: "They dug a pit for my nephesh. May ruin overtake them: may the net they hid for me entangle them, may they fall into the pit. Then my nephesh will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation." My whole being. Bad guys rise up, they asked me things I don't know. They repay me evil for good in

Let's Get Physical

order to bring a loss to my nephesh." So here they want to do damage to my nephesh.

"But as for me, when these guys...so here's these guys. They're treating me bad to damage my nephesh. But me, when these guys were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: and I deprived my nephesh with fasting. O, Lord, how long will you look on? Restore my nephesh from their ravages."

These last three are so interesting. They want to damage my nephesh, my life, but when these guys were sick, I was praying for them and I fasted. He says, "I didn't eat food." And the phrase he uses to describe that as depriving my nephesh. Here we're pretty close to throat - literal throat. I didn't put anything down my gullet. Then we're back to "restore my nephesh."

Now, the complexity of this word for this poet is not confusing. It's like a treasure trove. He can just use this word in so many different ways, and every line he uses it, it become extra rich.

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. We released our video on the Hebrew word "nephesh." You can find the link to it in the show notes or you could go to our YouTube channel, youtube.com/thebibleproject and watch it there.

The Bible Project is a nonprofit in Portland, Oregon. We create free resources that show the Bible as a unified story that leads to Jesus. We believe the Bible has wisdom for the modern world and we're committed to letting the Bible talk to us on its terms. This project is crowdfunded, so thank you for being a part of this with us.